

Chapter One – Revelations

“I don’t know what happened! One minute, I was running and the next I was on top of the school roof! I didn’t climb up the roof, I swear! I just...” the young boy struggled to find the words to explain. “...I just sort of popped there.”

Harry stared anxiously at his aunt and uncle, who were sitting on a sofa facing him. He stood stiffly in front of them, feeling as if he were facing the police. His green eyes were fearful as he pleaded for understanding, though with little expectation that he would be believed. It was incredible even to him...and he had lived through the bizarre experience. But this was the truth – incredible though it seemed.

One minute, he was running away from his cousin, Dudley, and his gang. Harry knew that, if they caught him, he was in for a beating. It was one of Dudley’s favorite pastimes – to beat up on his cousin. Although they had been raised together since Harry was 18 months old and his parents had died in an accident, he and Dudley had never looked on each other as brothers. Responding to the tone set by his parents, Dudley had always treated Harry with disdain, and used him as his personal punching bag.

So, when Harry had been chased by Dudley, he had been frantic to escape. He had been running through the school grounds, where only a few children played during the summer break. He had known that it was only a matter of seconds before he would be caught. He found himself wishing frantically that he could escape and, the next second, he had “popped out” on the school roof.

The school custodian had not been amused. He had assumed Harry had climbed on to the roof and Harry hadn’t even attempted to defend himself. The truth was too unbelievable. But, when he had returned home, and was facing the wrath of his aunt and uncle, he had tried to explain.

At ten, Harry was a small, skinny boy. His deep green eyes shone bright in his too pale face. Forced to spend much of his time in the small cupboard under the stairs where his aunt and uncle

begrudgingly housed him, Harry had the slightly unhealthy air of a convalescent. Harry rarely was permitted to play outside. If they thought they could've gotten away with it, Harry knew that his relatives would not even have sent him to school. They felt that the less time Harry interacted with the neighbors, the better.

Harry had grown up knowing that he was worthless and a mistake. How often had he heard Uncle Vernon say, "Even your parents couldn't wait to get away from you! They had to die to do it, but who can blame them?"

Harry knew that his aunt, uncle and cousin had no choice but to have to spend some time with him, as he lived with them. As Aunt Petunia put it, "It's too bad we can't pick our relatives, Harry. It is my duty, as my sister was your mother, to take you in. It's lucky you have us, or it would've been the orphanage for you."

It was no surprise – who could fault them? – for wanting to avoid seeing Harry as much as possible. So, he was shunted aside, forced to spend hours in his cupboard and, even when allowed out, expected to be as invisible as possible.

Harry was used to his aunt and uncle finding fault with him. He tried to do what they asked, but he seemed to anger them by his very existence. So, it was with a heavy, anxious heart, Harry waited for them to deal with this most unusual situation.

The principal had called Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon to complain. Harry had overheard some of the conversation and knew that the man had tried to soften some of the criticism against Harry by suggesting that this was Harry's way of dealing with the stress of having graduated elementary school and knowing that he was to attend Stonewall High in September. Aunt Petunia had agreed on the phone but Harry, his heart sinking, thought that he'd be lucky if they didn't lock him in his cupboard for a year!

Would they starve him? he wondered anxiously. Harry was frequently sent to his cupboard without dinner and he was used to feeling a continual, persistent ache of hunger. But, he remembered with alarm the time when he had hit Dudley back after Dudley had pushed him

down the stairs. He had been locked in his cupboard three days without food. The ache in his stomach had felt like a knife piercing him. He never wanted to feel like that again!

Having finished his inadequate explanation of why he had been on the school roof, Harry waited for judgment to fall. However, his uncle didn't start yelling as he usually did. Instead, Harry watched in confusion as his aunt and uncle exchanged significant, somber looks.

"Petunia..." began Vernon.

"I know, Vernon," she cut him off.

Harry looked from one to the other in puzzlement. It was as if they were speaking in code. What did Aunt Petunia 'know'?

Petunia looked down at her hands which were folded in her lap, grasped so tightly together that the knuckles showed white. Her face was drawn and her lips were pursed so firmly, it looked as if she had just sucked on a lemon. Finally, she took a deep breath and raised her eyes to her nephew's. Her black, beady eyes looked coldly at the boy. Without looking at her husband, she said, "Let me handle this, Vernon. I know what we have to do. Leave us alone for a while, won't you?"

Without a word, her husband lumbered to his feet and left the room. A silence filled the living room. Harry glanced at the door through which his uncle had disappeared. He had never looked upon his uncle as a defender but, somehow, he felt even more uneasy now that his uncle had left. He dragged his eyes back to his aunt's and found that she was still watching him, without any softening in her expression. He gulped.

Aunt Petunia started talking in a low voice, as if trying to contain herself. However, Harry could hear the hate lacing her words. "I've hoped and prayed that you could escape the taint in my sister's blood. But, I can deny the truth no longer. It is clear that you're one of ...them." She spat the last word in disgust. She answered the unspoken question in Harry's scared, bewildered eyes. "A wizard!

That's what you are! I did my best to help you escape this curse, but you are like your parents.

"My sister – your mother – was a witch. She was so pleased to be able to do magic, she never thought about how unnatural and evil she was. You have no idea what it's like to know your own sister is a foul creature. And then, she married another of your kind! I would have been happy never to hear her name again, to pretend that I had never had a sister. But no! She had to get herself killed and saddle me with you. I've had to raise you – knowing you were spawn of evil. But, I hoped that, against all odds – you weren't the unnatural creature I knew you'd be. But, the truth will out! You...you 'apparated' on that roof."

Harry was so shocked by the tirade unleashed by his aunt, he wouldn't have been able to formulate a question even if she had paused for breath and allowed him to speak. A wizard! He was a wizard! And, that's why his aunt and uncle hated him. His thoughts were jumbled in confusion. Despite his aunt's obvious disgust, Harry felt a thrill of ecstasy at learning that he was a wizard and his parents had been magical too. He didn't think being magical was evil. Fairy godmothers were magical. So was the genie in Aladdin. They weren't evil. But, he also recognized that his aunt hated him for a reason he couldn't change. He was never going to be able to win her approval. His very existence was an abomination to her.

Pushing aside his shock, Harry tried to focus on absorbing as much information as his aunt would tell him. His eyes begged to understand and, for once, she didn't hold back. The floodgates had been opened.

"Your mother bragged about her magical powers. She told me all about apparating. When she was 17, she passed her apparition test on the first try; she was so proud. Like it was a driving test!

"Well, let me tell you where all that magic got her! Dead! Killed by a wizard even more unnatural than her! After she was married and was pregnant with you, she visited our parents when I was visiting there, too. She told us how she and her husband were going into hiding because of a prophecy that the headmaster of her school had heard. This prophecy said that you would defeat this evil wizard, Voldemort.

Voldemort had learned of the prophecy and was going to try to kill you. She said that you would have powers this Dark Lord didn't know about and that he would mark you as his equal, whatever that means. But, only one of you could survive. I remember how she rubbed her belly and told my parents how you were destined to be a great wizard. How she was scared but that she just knew you'd defeat him. 'My son will be a hero,' she boasted.

"Well, my parents died a few weeks later in a car accident and she couldn't even come to the funeral because she was in hiding. And, then this Dark Wizard you were supposed to kill, killed them instead. So, some hero you are! You didn't stop this man from killing your parents! And I got you." She said it in disgust.

"You were left on my doorstep with a letter from the headmaster of the magic school your mother had attended, asking me to take you in -- to seal the 'blood magic'. Your mother died to save your life, Hero. The letter said that the wizard who was after you had temporarily lost his powers but would be back eventually. As long as I let you live with me, you'd be protected from this wizard and his followers.

"Well, I've done my duty for years. But, I've had enough. I will not have a wizard in my house. I can no longer deny that you are evil and I will not pollute my family anymore with your presence. I want you out of here!"

Harry was stunned. "Out of here?" What did she mean? Did she mean he was to go to an orphanage? His blood ran cold and a rushing sound filled his ears.

"I want you to pack up some things, and leave. I don't care where you go. Whatever happens to you from now on has nothing to do with me. Go find some school chum to stay with, sleep in the park, go to an orphanage. I don't care! Just keep away from my family from now on. I am washing this stain from my family's blood. I want to forget you ever existed!"

Harry's legs were shaking so much, he expected them to fail him any second. "Please..." he didn't complete the sentence. The blazing look

of hatred that his aunt cast upon him was frightening. Harry backed away in fear.

“And don’t tell anyone your name! I don’t want any police banging on our door claiming we’ve abandoned you!” Aunt Petunia called after Harry, as he fled the room.

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Harry spent a restless night in his cupboard. He replayed in his mind his aunt’s diatribe and it was a long time before he was able to fall asleep. While it was shocking to learn that there was such a thing as magic – and that he was a wizard – in some ways, it explained so much of his life. Now, he understood how his hair had grown back overnight after his aunt had given him a horrible haircut a few years ago. He remembered how his teacher’s hair had turned blue after he had made a nasty comment about Harry’s ill-fitting clothes (hand-me-downs from Dudley), causing the class to laugh cruelly at Harry. Most importantly, it explained how the numerous cuts and bruises he had received from Dudley, Aunt Petunia or Uncle Vernon had healed so quickly.

Harry felt a thrill of fear seize his body when he thought about being on his own. He kept hoping that Aunt Petunia would have changed her mind in the morning. On the other hand, a small voice in Harry’s head was whispering that it would be so wonderful never to have to see his relatives again. Never would he have to stay locked in his cupboard. There would be no one to order him around. He could go where he wanted and maybe find a new family.

Of course, there was this ominous sounding Dark Wizard out there. If he understood his aunt correctly, this wizard would be looking to kill Harry as soon as he left the “blood protection” of his aunt’s house. Harry bitterly noted that his aunt didn’t care about placing him in such danger. The part of Harry that wasn’t scared to death about leaving the only home he had known wanted to turn his back on his aunt and tell her that he never wanted to see her, her miserable husband, or his hateful cousin ever again!

When Harry woke up the next morning, he was clear-headed despite having so little sleep. It was as if his brain had been working out the solution to his problems while he slept. So, when Harry opened his eyes, he knew what he was going to do.

If his aunt insisted, he would need to leave here. He would need a new place to stay and a way to support himself. The only way to do this was to pretend to be older. The key to everything was in a disguise. If this Dark Wizard, or his followers, were looking for Harry Potter, he didn't want anyone to know who or where he was. "Don't worry, Aunt Petunia," Harry muttered to himself, jaw clenching, remembering Aunt Petunia's warning that Harry not tell anyone his name. "I have no intention of telling anyone I'm Harry Potter."

Harry looked around his cupboard one last time, pulling a few clothes into a pile that he intended to put in a bag to take with him. As he looked around, Harry barely focused on the fact that he might never see his room again. He was distracted by his constant thought, "I need to hide myself. I don't want anyone to know I'm Harry Potter. I don't want to look like Harry Potter anymore."

When Harry pulled open the door to his cupboard and stepped out, Harry was taken aback by how small the door opening seemed to be. Had it shrunk? But, when Harry straightened up from his semi-stoop upon exiting the cupboard, he saw his reflection in a hallway mirror. Harry's jaw dropped open as he realized that the stranger in the mirror was him! A boy about 17 or 18 stood there, taller, with wider shoulders, a long nose, light brown hair and slightly small, brown eyes. Harry approached the mirror slowly. He turned his head from side to side, examining his new look. He was not a good-looking teenager. This was good. Good-looking people often attracted attention. Rather, this stranger's face seemed to be the type to fade into the background. When this thought crossed Harry's mind, he smiled. Perfect!

Harry heard his aunt and uncle stirring. Reaching into his mind, he sent out a tentative wish to regain his appearance. Immediately, his nose shortened, his hair darkened to black, his eyes turned green, and his body regained its smaller, scrawnier appearance. It was surprisingly easy to alter his appearance, Harry found.

Harry had transformed none too soon. He turned to see his aunt descending the stairs. She had a frown on her face and her brow was furrowed. "What?! Are you still here? What part of 'get out' didn't you understand?" she said nastily.

Harry tried not to let her hatred hurt him. However, he couldn't help the stab of pain that pierced his heart upon realizing that his aunt couldn't care less about him. That she actually disliked him. Was he so unlovable?

Harry lifted his chin and said, "I'm leaving," in a hard voice. He refused to let her see that she had hurt him.

"Good!"

"I...I just wanted..." Harry trailed off. He didn't know what to say. What did he want? Money to help him on his way? An apology for all of the times he had been mistreated? A tearful pleading not to leave? All of this.

Finally, not able to complete his sentence, Harry turned away from his aunt. He went to the kitchen where he found a bag for the few clothes he was taking with him. He grabbed some food from the refrigerator – ignoring the guilty feeling in his stomach. He had never been allowed to take food without asking.

Then, he went back through the hall to the front door. He ignored his aunt, who was standing in the hall. Neither spoke. Harry reached the front door and pulled it open. He stepped out into the sunlight of the new day and heard the door shut behind him.

Taking a deep breath, Harry focused on leaving as he had focused on escaping Dudley the day before. Was it just 24 hours ago that his world had turned upside down? With a pop, Harry apparated away from Number 4 Privet Drive.

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Chapter Two – Diagon Alley

Whenever Harry thought back over the first week after he left his aunt's house, he remembered the feeling of sheer terror mixed with heady freedom. As a lanky teenager, he was able to secure a job washing dishes, and serving as a bus boy, for a restaurant in the city to which he had apparated. This city was the first place Harry had been able to think of, the morning he had left the Dursleys. Although he had never visited it before, he had heard them speak of it, as it was the nearest urban center to Little Whinging. Harry had thought to lose himself among the crowds, where an isolated young adult would attract less attention than in the small town where he had lived most of his life.

Harry was right. No one gave him a second glance. Even at his job, people barely registered that he was even there, must less cared to ask him personal questions about his life. Busboys came and went with frequency, and the restaurant owner only cared about whether Harry showed up on time or not.

For the first time in his life, however, Harry was able to eat enough to lose the constant hungry feeling in his stomach. While he wasn't allowed to take any food with him, one of the perks of the job was that he was able to eat as much as he wanted at the restaurant. At first, Harry tentatively ate only small portions but, when he realized that no one paid any attention to how much he ate, he soon began to enjoy the sensation of eating three solid meals a day.

Harry shared a small room in an apartment with a number of other young people, mostly immigrants. The boss at the restaurant had given Harry the name of a woman who rented out a portion of her apartment for day laborers to live. There was a rotating schedule of people who shared the small apartment. There were three shifts of people who used the beds, based on their work schedule. Harry's schedule to use the bed was during the hours of midnight to six o'clock in the morning.

One of the biggest changes for Harry was responding to a new name. He had spent a few hours having fun deciding what his new name would be. Finally, he had decided on

“Mark Twist”. “Mark” because he was literally “marked” by the scar hidden by his glamour charm and because he was figuratively a “marked man,” targeted by some evil dark wizard who was apparently running around looking to kill him. Harry didn’t ever want to forget this, or to relax his guard. “Twist” as a tribute to a famous literary orphan, Oliver Twist. Harry felt keenly that there was no one who loved him – he was an orphan and had to rely on himself only. And, if there was a sneaking hope that he, like Oliver Twist, would find himself a new family who cared about him, Harry refused to acknowledge this.

So, the days and months fell into a pattern. Harry spent his days washing dishes, or busing tables. When he had a few hours free from work each day, Harry tried to read as much as possible. He was aware that he was missing out on his formal education, and he hoped to learn at least a little on his own. Harry found that, without the constant fear of displeasing his aunt and uncle, he enjoyed learning and was soon a voracious reader. Unfortunately, he wasn’t able to learn anything about the wizarding world in the public library.

Harry was incredibly lonely. He had no friends at all. At work, socializing was discouraged, as the boss felt that this distracted the workers from performing their duties. At the apartment he shared with so many others, there was little opportunity for socializing either. Many of the boarders did not speak English and there was always someone sleeping in one of the beds. The woman who owned the apartment preferred for her boarders to come by only when it was time for them to use the bed or shower. The rest of the time, they were encouraged to find somewhere else to spend time.

Harry’s 11th birthday came and went without any fanfare. He barely noticed it himself.

A few weeks after he had turned 11, an incident occurred that marked a turning point in Harry’s life. It was a Sunday, and he had a rare day free, as the restaurant was closed for a few simple renovations. Harry was walking through a park when he noticed a rugby game in progress. The players looked about 10 or 11 years’ old. Harry watched them longingly; he would so love to join in.

Almost without realizing it, Harry felt himself shrink and become a younger version of Mark Twist. He looked around surreptitiously and was relieved to see that no one was around him – no one had noticed the transformation. Harry sternly warned himself that he would have to be more careful in the future. If he were going to transform, he should have found a private spot to do it!

Anyway, as an 11 year old, Harry slowly approached the other children. When they noticed him, they were eager to have Harry join them, to add to their numbers. Harry had one of the best days of his life. It was with more than a hint of reluctance that he transformed into an older version of Mark Twist, in order to return to the boarding house where he lived.

When he arrived at the house, he was given an odd looking letter. “This came while you were gone,” said his landlady. “I don’t know who delivered it because it’s Sunday. It was lying by the mail slot.”

Harry looked at it in surprise, and slowly reached out his hand to take the letter from her, thanking her absently. Who could be writing to him? Even if his aunt and uncle wanted to reach him, the letter was addressed to “Mark Twist” and they didn’t know that he was going by this name.

Harry found himself a private corner to read his letter. He ran his finger wonderingly over the raised seal, “Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry”. His heart started to beat faster. Was this the school his mother had attended?

Harry opened the letter carefully.

HOGWARTS SCHOOL OF WITCHCRAFT AND WIZARDRY

Headmaster: Albus Dumbledore

(Order of Merlin, First Class, Grad Sorc.,

Chf. Warlock, Supreme Mugwump, International Confed. of Wizards)

Dear Mr. Twist,

We are pleased to inform you that you have a place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Please find enclosed a list of all necessary books and equipment.

Term begins on 1 September. A representative from Hogwarts will arrive at 10 a.m. tomorrow to explain further and to take you to Diagon Alley to help you to purchase your school supplies.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall

Deputy Headmistress

P.S. We apologize for the delay in your receiving this letter, which is usually sent to students on their 11th birthday. For some reason, your name did not appear on our list of attending students until early this morning.

Harry read the letter a number of times, letting it sink in. This was the world that his aunt had feared. Magic! The very word rolled off Harry's tongue promising wonders. If this was the world he belonged in, as his aunt said, then it was here that he would find the family and friends he craved. But, Harry cautioned himself, it was also the world of the psycho dark wizard who had killed his parents and was after him. He could never forget this, and must continue to hide who he was.

Reading the postscript, Harry realized that, if he had not transformed this afternoon into a younger Mark Twist, the Hogwarts registry would not have listed him as attending the school. Apparently, whatever magic he had been able to marshal in order to fix himself as Mark Twist, rather than Harry Potter, was very strong and captured all aspects of his being Mark Twist – whether he was in his younger or older version. As an older Mark Twist, he would have missed his chance to attend Hogwarts. As an 11 year old, the school registry must have sensed a magical child and included his name on the list of children who should be attending school.

Tomorrow, he would meet a representative of the school. Another wizard! Harry would barely wait. He would have to wait outside and try to intercept this person before he or she knocked on the door. There was no 11 year old Mark Twist at this address. What would he do if this person wanted to speak with his parents? Harry turned various ideas over in his head and finally decided to wait to see what happened and just wing it.

The next day found a young boy sitting on the steps leading up to the apartment building where a number of boarders shared a room. He was obviously looking for someone, as his eyes scanned the street continuously. Anyone watching him would have realized at once that the boy had obviously spotted something by the way his eyes widened in alarm and his whole body stiffened. Swallowing hard, the boy slowly stood up.

An enormous man was walking toward the boy. Easily towering over even a tall man, the man's face was covered in hair, making him seem like a mountain man. His alarming appearance was softened by the smile that lit up his face. Gathering his courage, Harry descended the steps where he had been sitting, and approached the man.

"Mark Twist, are ye?" rumbled the man.

Harry gulped and nodded, and held out his hand. It was enveloped in a hand the size of a dustbin cover. "Hello, sir."

"Pleased to meet ye! Pleased to meet ye!" the man exclaimed, pumping Harry's hand enthusiastically. "Me name's Hagrid. Rubeus Hagrid. Keeper of the Keys at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry." And Harry's blank stare, he continued, "The gamekeeper there." Harry nodded.

"Well, Mark, I bet findin' out ye were a wizard was a bit of a shock. Ye were a bit of a shock to the school, too! It's never happened before that a student just appeared on the roster a few weeks before school started. Usually, even muggleborns – that's a witch or wizard born of non-magical parents – appear on the list a few years before they are scheduled to attend Hogwarts. Magic usually shows itself when someone's about six or seven."

Hagrid paused and Harry didn't know what to say. Should he make up a story about how something happened yesterday to trigger his magic? "Er..." he began. But, Hagrid had already moved on to another topic.

"I'm here to help explain some things to yer parents and take ye to Diagon Alley to buy yer school supplies. Are yer parents inside?" Hagrid waved toward the building behind Harry, where he had been sitting on the steps waiting for Hagrid to appear.

Harry had been expecting this question and had his answer ready. He could only hope that it would satisfy Hagrid. "Actually, my parents had to leave today for a family emergency. My father's sister, Marge," this was actually the name of Uncle Vernon's sister – Harry thought it was best to stick as close as possible to truth, so that he wouldn't forget the story he was weaving, "is sick and they had to go take care of her. They almost took me with them, but I told them that I could meet with you myself and tell them what they needed to know."

Hagrid looked a little thrown that he wouldn't meet Mark Twist's parents, but he accepted Harry's story without question. "They're okay with ye being a wizard, are they?"

Harry nodded his head vigorously. "Oh, yes! They love the idea!"

Hagrid smiled, pleased. "That's great. Some muggleborns have a bit of trouble with their parents at first, just because it's so new to them, see? Anyway, we can be on our way then to Diagon Alley. That's good because we have to stop off at Gringott's, that's the wizard's bank, and that may take some time, if there's a line."

Hagrid's mention of a bank reminded Harry of one of his key worries. Not sure how to raise this point, he hesitantly said, "Sir. Does it cost a lot of money to go to Hogwarts? And are school supplies expensive? My parents don't make a lot of money..."

"Not a problem, not a problem," smiled the giant. "There's a scholarship for muggleborn students to attend Hogwarts. It's common for muggles not to feel comfortable with sendin' their kids off to a

school they don't know anythin' about, and add that to havin' to pay money! Well, a scholarship was set up hundreds of years ago so that any muggleborns would be able to go to Hogwarts if their parents were hesitatin' because of the cost. I attended Hogwarts for a few years usin' that scholarship meself!"

At Harry's questioning look, Hagrid muttered, "I didn't actually graduate Hogwarts. That's another story. Let's get crackin'!"

Harry nodded obediently and trotted alongside Hagrid, as the Keeper of the Keys started up the street. A thousand questions ran through Harry's head, but he bit his tongue. He didn't want to annoy this enormous man, who was being very friendly to him. He knew that adults often were irritated when children asked too many questions.

Harry was surprised that they used the public transportation. Hagrid attracted a lot of attention because of his size and obvious unfamiliarity with the Underground system. Harry had never ridden on the Underground before himself, but he was able to figure out how to pay without too much trouble. He enjoyed the new experience but wondered how this was going to help them arrive at Diagon Alley. Surely, the Underground wouldn't take them there?

The two got off at a crowded station and Hagrid led Harry outside, where they walked for a while, until they arrived at what seemed like a typical busy street. Hagrid gestured to a building across the street and said, "There's the Leaky Cauldron. We can enter Diagon Alley through there."

Harry's eyes almost popped out of his head. Until Hagrid had mentioned the Leaky Cauldron, he hadn't even noticed it was there. It was as if a building had just popped into existence. Looking around, Harry noticed that muggles (what an interesting word!) didn't seem to realize it was there. Their eyes seemed to slide from the building on the left to the building on the right of the Leaky Cauldron, without noticing that there was a building in between.

Hagrid, noticing Harry's look, chuckled. "Only witches and wizards can see this building, Mark. Muggles can't see the Leaky Cauldron unless they're with a witch or wizard."

“Wow!” said Harry, inarticulately. He hadn’t even entered into the wizarding world and already it was amazing!

They entered the Leaky Cauldron, and Harry saw that it was a pub. There were a number of people sitting at tables or the bar, eating and drinking and a low hum of conversation filled the room. A hunchbacked barkeeper was cleaning glasses and smiled toothlessly at Hagrid as he entered the room. “Hagrid! The usual?”

“Not today, Tom. I’ve got a new student that I have to help get ready for Hogwarts.”

Tom looked at Mark and lowered the glass he was polishing. “Not...not Harry Potter?” he whispered hoarsely, his voice filled with hope.

The noise in the pub ceased immediately and Harry felt all eyes on him. He froze in terror. But, Hagrid was already shaking his enormous, hairy head. “No, Tom. No. Ye know he’s still missing.” Hagrid’s voice was filled with sadness. “This here’s Mark Twist.” Hagrid patted Harry on the back and he was propelled forward a few steps from the force of the friendly blow.

An increase in the chatter filled the vacuum caused by Tom’s guess. People were shaking their heads and looking unhappy, muttering to themselves or each other and Harry heard the words “Harry Potter” coming from all corners.

There was a slight rustle at the bar, and a small man rose from a stool. “Oh, Professor Quirrell,” greeted Hagrid. “I didn’t see ye there. Mark, Professor Quirell will be yer Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts.”

Harry smiled politely, and held out his hand, “It’s a pleasure to meet you, sir.”

“L..l..ikewise,” stuttered the professor. “M..m..ake sure you read the first chapter of the course book before class!” But, he smiled kindly when he said this.

Harry nodded obediently and said, "I'm looking forward to doing so, sir."

They exchanged goodbyes and Harry followed Hagrid into the alley behind the Leaky Cauldron. When they were clear of other people, Harry took a deep breath and asked, daringly, "Hagrid, who's Harry Potter? Why were all those people interested in him?"

Hagrid looked so sad, Harry half expected him to break into tears. "Harry Potter is a boy yer own age, who was to attend Hogwarts this year. He's not at his aunt and uncle's house where he had been left. Everyone's looking for him, but he hasn't been found. We're all very worried about him." Before Hagrid could say any more, they had reached a stone wall. Hagrid gave a big sniff, swallowing his tears, and turned his attention to the wall.

Hagrid tapped some stones with a broken, pink umbrella Hagrid had under his coat. Harry's mouth dropped open as the stone wall opened to reveal a magical world behind – Diagon Alley. Immediately, all questions about Harry Potter fled his mind. All he could think about was this magical place. A thousand questions filled his head, but he couldn't take the time to ask any of them, as his eyes darted from one building to another, from one person to another, drinking in the sights.

Harry barely registered when Hagrid pulled him gently by the arm. In a daze, Harry followed obediently. "We need to go to Gringott's first, to get ye some money," Hagrid said. At these words, Harry's eyes followed where Hagrid had gestured and saw, at the end of the street, a beautiful, white colonnade building. It dominated the street.

As they climbed the stairs to the bank, Harry read aloud the inscription over the doorway.

"Enter stranger, but take heed

Of what awaits the sins of greed,

For those who take, but do not earn,

Must pay dearly in their turn,
So if you seek beneath our floors
A treasure that was never yours,
Thief, you have been warned, beware
Of finding more than treasure there.”

“Ye’d have to mad ter try to rob Gringotts,” Hagrid muttered.

Inside, Harry tried not to be rude by staring at the unusual creatures that worked in the bank. Under his breath, Hagrid murmured, “These are goblins, Mark. They are sly and dangerous creatures. Don’t ye ever cross a goblin; they’ll get back at ye, fer sure.”

Hagrid approached a desk and waited for the goblin to acknowledge his presence. “Morning. We’ve come to take some money outta vault 123. An’ I also got a letter here from Professor Dumbledore. It’s about the You-Know-What in vault 713.”

Harry wondered idly whether his family had a vault in this bank too. For all he knew, his parents may have left him money. But, he couldn’t ask of course. Someday, when it was safe, he would have to remember to check, Harry thought.

The goblin read the letter, nodded to Hagrid and called over another goblin. “Griphook! Please escort Mr. Hagrid to vaults 123 and 713.”

The goblin, Hagrid and Harry climbed into a little cart that resembled a miner’s cart. Soon, Harry was on a dizzying ride through the bowels of Gringotts. It was what Harry had imagined a rollercoaster ride would be like. At one point, Harry noticed what looked like flame from below them.

“Hagrid, what’s that?”

“Maybe a dragon,” Hagrid said. “Don’t ask any questions. It’s better if I keep me mouth shut.”

Harry realized, then, that Hagrid was slowly turning green. Obviously, Hagrid did not enjoy this rollercoaster trip to the vaults.

They came first to vault number 123 and Harry clambered from the cart, with Hagrid heaving himself slowly from his seat. Griphook opened the door and, inside the vault, Harry could see many small piles of coins, evenly spaced throughout the room. Hagrid waved a big hand around the room and explained, "Each pile is fer a scholarship student. Yer pile's the one closest to the door. The next student that needs the scholarship will get the next pile, and so on. There are seven years at Hogwarts. That pile has to last ye throughout yer schoolin', so ye best be careful how ye spend it!"

Harry nodded in understanding. He carefully measured out 1/7th of the pile and slipped the coins into his pocket. He would have to make this money last for one year. It was a daunting prospect. But, he also had a little bit of savings from his restaurant job. He would have to ask how muggle money was changed into wizarding money so that he could supplement the scholarship with his own earnings.

Harry listened carefully as Hagrid explained the difference between knuts, sickles and galleons. It seemed complicated to him, but Hagrid assured him that he would get the hang of it very quickly.

They climbed back into the cart to continue on to vault 713. To Harry's eyes, it seemed that Hagrid was very reluctant to climb back inside. They arrived at the next vault very quickly and Hagrid followed Griphook to the vault, where he took a small package, wrapped in brown paper, and put it inside his coat. Harry was surprised that the rest of the vault seemed to be empty, except for that small package. However, he sensed that questions would not be welcome and he held his tongue.

After they left Gringotts, Hagrid took a deep breath of air. "Mark, would ye mind if I left you fer a bit while I get a drink at the Leaky Cauldron? That Gringott's cart takes a bit out of me, no mistake. I'll leave ye at Ollivander's and come and get ye in just a few, all right?"

“Sure, Hagrid,” Harry agreed, although he was a bit nervous about being left on his own in this alien world.

After Hagrid deposited him at the doorstep of Ollivander’s wand store, Harry watched the giant totter down the street on his way back to the Leaky Cauldron. Then, taking a deep breath, Harry opened the door and entered on his own. At first, it seemed as if he was alone in the shop. But, then he realized that an old man, with pale, bulging eyes was staring at him from the corner.

Harry started, but then said politely, “Hello, sir. I am here to purchase a wand.”

The elderly man looked at him piercingly and said, slowly, “I do not recognize you, sir.
Am I right in believing you to be muggleborn?”

Harry nodded his head slowly. “Yes, sir. I am Mark Twist.”

The man continued, “I am Ollivander, the owner of this shop. I will help you to find your wand but, remember, that the wand chooses the wizard. While you can use any wand to do magic, no other wand will work as well for you as the wand that chooses you. Now, what is your wand arm?”

“Er...I’m right handed, if that’s what you mean?”

Immediately, a measuring tape flew through the air and started measuring Harry’s arm and taking other measurements as well. Ignoring the tape, Ollivander started pulling boxes from the rows and rows of boxes lining the walls of the shop. He laid the boxes upon a counter and, calling to him, asked Harry to open the box and start trying out the wands that Ollivander had selected. Harry opened box after box and held wands made of every different kind of wood, with dragon heartstrings, unicorn hairs, and phoenix feather cores. Wand after wand felt no different to Harry and his heart started to sink.

What if they didn’t let him into Hogwarts if no wand chose him?

But, Ollivander seemed to consider the continued failure to find a suitable wand to be a personal challenge. He seemed more and more excited the longer it took for Harry to find a wand.

Finally, he turned to Harry and looked at him assessingly. “Mr. Twist. Let’s see if we can do this another way. Can you close your eyes and imagine yourself holding a wand? Let that be the only thought in your head. Let it consume every corner of your brain. Call to that wand to come into your hand. Imagine it with every ounce of your will.”

Harry closed his eyes. He closed his right hand around an imaginary wand and pictured a thin stick of wood there, smooth and cool to the touch. He imagined waving it in mid air and actually raised his arm, holding the imaginary wand. How he wanted that wand! With every fiber of his being, he wished. For every birthday that ever went by without any presents, he wished. For every Christmas that saw a pile of presents for Dudley and none for him, he wished. He wished so hard, he actually felt a stick of wood poking at his hand.

“Aahhh,” said Ollivander.

At this, Harry opened his eyes and saw that, indeed, he had not imagined it. A wand had flown out of its box and was bumping his hand, demanding to be held. Harry gratefully closed his hand around the wand and immediately felt a thrill of electricity throughout his body. Sparks flew from the end of the wand and it glowed warmly in his hand. Harry smiled the widest smile of his life and lifted his eyes to share this exciting moment with Ollivander. However, the appraising look that Ollivander cast upon him caused Harry’s smile to disappear.

“What’s the matter?” Harry demanded.

“It’s just curious,” muttered Ollivander, slowly.

“What’s curious?” asked Harry. The way Ollivander was looking at him was alarming.

“The phoenix that gave his feather to this wand, gave just one other feather. It’s curious that you are destined for this wand when its brother went to another unknown muggle-born who became a

remarkable leader. I think we can expect great things from you, Mr. Twist. After all, the wizard who had the twin wand did great things. Terrible things, but great.”

Harry knew instinctively that Ollivander must be referring to the dark wizard who had killed his parents. “What was this wizard’s name?” he asked.

“Oh, we do not speak his name,” warned Ollivander. The elderly man forestalled any more questions by turning away from Harry and moving to his till. He rang up the sale and Harry was soon seven gold Galleons lighter in his pocket.

No sooner had Harry purchased the wand than Hagrid returned from his trip to the Leaky Cauldron. Harry noticed that Hagrid’s cheeks were a little redder and he seemed a bit more jovial than earlier.

“All done there, Mark? Great. Let’s just moving on then, shall we? We have a lot of stops to make today.”

Harry was relieved that Ollivander did not mention the wand’s sharing a core with the wand of this anonymous dark wizard. He swiftly said goodbye to Ollivander and followed Hagrid out of the store.

Harry would have been alarmed had he known that, as soon as he left the shop, Ollivander sent a message to Albus Dumbledore, the headmaster of Hogwarts, alerting him that a young muggleborn, Mark Twist, had purchased this particular wand. Hours later, reading this message, Dumbledore would pace his study in thought, wondering whether he was seeing the birth of a new dark wizard. It was now twice in as many days that the name Mark Twist had come to his attention. First, Mr. Twist’s name had inexplicably appeared on the register of new students. Then, the very next day, this same Mr. Twist purchased a wand which was the twin of Lord Voldemort’s. What could this mean? Dumbledore vowed to keep a close eye on Mark Twist.

Harry followed Hagrid to his next stop at Flourish and Blotts. Here, Harry consulted his book list and realized that he would be spending too much of his scholarship money if he did not budget carefully. So,

he asked to be directed to the second-hand books and was shown to a small bin in the back of the store. As Harry sifted through the bin carefully, another boy approached him.

This boy looked to be about Harry's own age, but much taller. The boy had red hair and freckles. "Hi," said the boy shyly. "Are you starting Hogwarts, too?"

Harry nodded. "And you?"

"Yes. I'm Ron Weasley." Harry shook the proffered hand.

"I'm Mark Twist." Harry shifted over to allow the boy to look through the same bin. "Are you buying your books here too?"

The boy's cheeks turned a bit red, as if embarrassed to be buying books second-hand but he nodded and started looking through the bin as well. There was silence for a few minutes as the boys looked. Harry desperately wanted to say something, but couldn't think of how to start a conversation. He was not used to interacting with children his own age. All the children in his school gave him wide berth so as not to get on Dudley's bad side. Harry was enormously relieved when Ron started up a conversation.

"I've been looking forward to going to Hogwarts for ages. I have five older brothers who have attended. I can't believe it's finally my turn."

Harry realized it was his turn to say something and cast around in his head for something to say. "I don't have any brothers or sisters. I didn't know about Hogwarts until I received the letter. It was an enormous surprise."

Ron looked at Harry with interest. "Oh, so you're muggleborn?"

Harry nodded. "I bet everyone knows more than me," Harry admitted his secret fear.

"Don't worry about that. There are plenty of muggleborns at Hogwarts and they get along just fine. There's so much to learn, even

purebloods -- kids born to witches and wizards,” Ron explained kindly, “don’t have much of an advantage.”

Harry was relieved. Suddenly, it seemed as if the shop were teaming with red-heads, as Ron was surrounded by his family. “Ron, are you done yet?” asked his mother. Impatiently, an older boy in spectacles, twin boys, and a younger girl all waited for Ron to join them as they continued shopping.

Ron pulled the last book on his list from the bin and said, “All set, Mum. I’ll see you around then?” Ron asked Harry.

Harry nodded quickly. “Sure. See you.”

But, before Ron could leave with his family, one of his twin brothers piped up, “Who’s your friend, Ronald?”

Ron turned red at being called Ronald in front of his new friend. “This is Mark Twist. He’s a first year like me.” Ron’s father joined the group and, knowing his father’s interest in all things muggle, Ron added, “He’s muggleborn.”

Mr. Weasley smiled widely at Harry and shook his hand. “Hello, Mark. Are your parents here?”

Harry shook his head. “No, sir. Hagrid is taking me through Diagon Alley today.”

“Cool,” said one of the twins. He, too, shook Harry’s hand and introduced himself as George.

The other twin immediately stepped forward and said, “Don’t listen to him, Mark. I’m George. He’s Fred.” He then cast a dark look at his twin and said, “Give him a break Fred. He’s new to our world and we need to give him time to settle in.” Harry would have felt relieved if he hadn’t heard George mutter under his breath, so that his mother couldn’t hear him. “And, besides, we’ll have plenty of time to torture him at school!”

The eldest boy shook Harry's hand and, pompously, introduced himself as "Percy Weasley, one of the prefects at Hogwarts. If ever you need a hand at school, don't hesitate to ask me for help, Mark. It is the job of every prefect to be a guiding light and a source of comfort for all students."

Harry thanked him solemnly, but had to keep from laughing out loud when he saw the twins rolling their eyes and making ridiculous faces behind Percy's back.

Mrs. Weasley smiled kindly at Harry and said, "I'm sure you'll have a good year at Hogwarts, Mark. It's a wonderful place. Ginny here," she gestured at the young girl at her side, "wishes she could go, too. Just one more year for her to join you!"

The girl blushed and hid her head. Harry didn't quite know what to say and settled for a, "Thank you, ma'am."

Introductions over, the Weasley family said goodbye to Harry and continued on their way. Harry was sorry to see Ron go. He hoped that he would see him again soon because Ron seemed very friendly. Realizing that Hagrid would be becoming impatient, Harry finished selecting his books, and other supplies (such as his potion ingredients and cauldron), and told Hagrid he was ready to continue shopping for the remainder of his school list.

At Madam Malkin's Robes for All Occasions, Harry selected some used robes and Madam Malkin tailored them to fit him. Harry was very used to wearing Dudley's hand-me down clothes, so it didn't trouble him at all that he wasn't buying new robes. While Harry was being measured by Madam Malkin, Hagrid had disappeared. Harry expected that Hagrid was bored with chaperoning him around and he was worried that Hagrid would decide to bring the day to a close before Harry had been able to purchase all of his supplies. With this in mind, Harry quickly agreed to all of Madam Malkin's suggestions and stood very still while his robes were being pinned up. He wanted to buy the robes as quickly as possible, so that he could go on to purchase the next item on his list before Hagrid ran out of patience.

"There, all done," said Madam Malkin, giving Harry a pat on his shoulder. "I must say, you are probably the best behaved boy I've ever had in my shop! I wish they would all stand as patiently as you did. I always tell them that it would go so much faster if they just stood still, but none of them listens."

Harry smiled and thanked Madam Malkin for her help. As he turned to leave, he noticed Hagrid through the window of the shop. He was thankful that he was finished so that he wouldn't have to make Hagrid wait. In puzzlement, Harry wondered why Hagrid was pointing to a bird cage that he was holding in his hand. A beautiful, snowy white owl was inside.

Harry stepped outside the robe shop and Hagrid greeted him with, "Hi ya, Mark. That was quick. While yer were doing that, I bought ye Hedwig here. It's me gift to ye, to welcome ye to the wizarding world."

Harry's eyes popped out of his head. He stared disbelievingly at Hagrid. He couldn't believe that Hagrid had bought him a gift. Never in his life had he received a gift before. "I...I..." he stammered. Hagrid seemed to understand what Harry couldn't say.

"Don' mention it," Hagrid said kindly. "As I told ye, I was a scholarship student meself. I didn't think you'd be able to afford an owl, an' they're dead useful, carry yer post an' everythin'."

"Thank you!" breathed Harry, as he took Hedwig's cage with reverence. "I'll take good care of her, Hagrid, I swear!"

Hagrid was taken aback by the piercing look he received from Mark's dark eyes. Hagrid was pleased to see how carefully the boy held the cage. It was rare to find someone who was as careful with animals as Hagrid himself. But, there was something a little odd about how polite and serious the boy was.

With their shopping done, Hagrid and Harry took the Underground back to Harry's apartment building. At the front of the building, Harry thanked Hagrid politely for having taken him to Diagon Alley.

“It were nottin’,” Hagrid dismissed. “I enjoyed showin’ ye around. Ye’ll have a great year at Hogwarts, don’t ye worry!”

Tentatively, Harry asked, “Would it be all right if I came by once in a while? It will be nice to know someone at Hogwarts.”

Hagrid beamed. “Sure thing, Mark. Yer welcome anytime. Me hut’s right on the grounds, so ye won’t miss it. I’ll expect ye for tea after ye’ve settled in, all right?”

Harry smiled. “Thank you, Hagrid. I’ll look forward to it.”

As Hagrid turned away to leave, Harry called him. “Hagrid, could I ask you a favor?” When Hagrid turned back, Harry lifted his arm holding Hedwig’s cage. “It’ll be a bit – difficult – for my parents to adjust to an owl, I think. My mom...she’s a bit scared of birds,” Harry lied. “Would you mind...could you...do you think you could take Hedwig back to Hogwarts with you now? I’ll be there in just a few weeks and I could take care of her then.”

Hagrid nodded immediately. “Sure, Mark. No problem. There’s an owlery at Hogwarts.” At Harry’s quizzical look, Hagrid explained. “That’s the building where the owls sleep at night. Hedwig will be fine there.”

Taking the cage from Harry, Hagrid said goodbye again and Harry watched the big man walk down the street, the bird cage swinging at his side. With difficulty, Harry hauled his trunk, now full of books, robes, potions, and his cauldron into the room he shared with so many others. He stuffed it in the closet, and hoped that his roommates wouldn’t be too annoyed with the big trunk taking up so much room. At least, it was locked so there was no danger anyone would peer inside.

Harry then composed himself to wait with as much patience as possible for the next two weeks to pass. Hogwarts! It called to him, with a promise of home he had never known.

AN: As always, reviews are welcome. Thank you!

Chapter Three – Year One; The Hogwarts Express

When the morning of September 1st arrived, Harry found himself almost shaking with excitement. He had awoken hours before he had needed to, but couldn't fall back asleep. He had stared at the ceiling of the room, listening to the snores of his fellow occupants, and allowed his mind to drift.

What would Hogwarts be like? He would be walking the halls where his mother and father had once also walked. Knowing that they had been there in the past, made Harry feel as if an imprint of their ghostly selves would be watching over their son.

After the months of being on his own, Harry was eagerly looking forward to being a kid again. At Hogwarts, he would be housed and fed, with adults responsible for ensuring his safety and the safety of the other students. It was strange, he thought, that he had always imagined a world without adults, a world where he could do everything he wanted. But, he hadn't realized how stressful it was to know that there was no security blanket under him – that he was responsible for his own housing, food, clothes, and everything else needed for daily survival.

Yes, he was ever aware that the magical world was the world where this psychopathic Dark Lord was after him. But, that danger seemed remote, and a concern for a far distant future. Here and now, Harry was thinking how much fun it would be to focus for the next 10 months just on his studies and making friends.

Trying to be quiet so as not to wake his roommates, Harry finally climbed out of bed, dressed and carefully removed his trunk from the closet. He slid it across the room and down the stairs. His landlady was waiting for him to say goodbye and to tell him that, as he had requested, she had arranged for a taxi to take him to Kings Cross station.

The taxi driver helped Harry put his trunk into the cab and then, once they had arrived at the train station, had helped to put the trunk on a cart there as well. Harry thanked the man and, although Harry felt a pang about spending his limited funds, he gave him a generous tip.

When Harry arrived at the train platforms, he couldn't find Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$, where the Hogwarts Express was supposed to be. He stood between platforms 9 and 10 and wondered what to do. Harry remembered how Hagrid had touched the brick wall in back of the Leaky Cauldron in order to enter Diagon Alley. Was something similar required here? Did Hagrid forget to tell him some secret signal? There were a lot of muggles around here, though, and he wouldn't want to attract attention. Harry was just about to get out his wand to tap, surreptitiously, on a wall standing between platforms 9 and 10, when he saw the Weasleys. Breathing a sigh of relief, he hurried over to them.

"Mark!" greeted Ron, smiling at him. "How are you?"

Harry smiled back, and nodded his head in greeting at the whole group. "Hello. I'm glad I found you. I don't know how to get onto Platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$. Hagrid never told me."

Fred immediately piped up, "You just have to jump up and down three times and cluck like a chicken."

Mrs. Weasley tutted. "Just ignore him, Mark. It's very simple. Percy, here, will go first to show you."

Percy, who had scowled in disapproval over Fred's joke, immediately puffed up his chest. "Yes, just watch me, Mark. You'll see that you just need to walk through that wall separating platforms 9 and 10. It's important to take the walk at just the right speed. Too slow, and your cart might not make it through. Too fast, and you run the danger of tripping on the other side, or not be able to stop before banging into someone standing there. The speed is critical..." He would have continued on with his lecture, if George hadn't given Percy's cart a push toward the wall. "Hey!" Running after it, Percy was barely able to touch the handle of the cart before it reached the wall. Both the cart and Percy disappeared through it.

The twins, Ron and Ginny stood laughing at the sight of Percy running after his runaway cart. Harry couldn't help smiling himself, although he could see that Mrs. Weasley was annoyed with the twins.

She turned to them and started lecturing them not to get into trouble that year. "I don't want to hear about you blowing up a toilet or anything!"

Smiling wickedly, George said, "That's a great idea, Mum!" Without waiting to hear any

more lecturing, he and his twin took off for the wall, and were soon swallowed up as well.

"Let's do that, too, Mark," suggested Ron. "Let's take the wall together."

Harry nodded gratefully. He knew that Ron must have gone through the wall before, when seeing his older brothers off to school in previous years. He realized that Ron had suggested that they take the wall together because he had guessed that Mark was nervous. Gulping and taking a deep breath, Harry seized the handle of his cart and, side by side with Ron, went through the wall.

It was like walking through a curtain. Almost immediately, he appeared on the opposite side and Platform 9¾ was in front of him. The gleaming, red Hogwarts Express proudly puffed steam, as it waited on the tracks. Students filed in and out of the doors, as they loaded their trunks into the train and then leapt back onto the platform to say goodbye to parents or greet new arrivals.

"Cool, isn't it?" asked Ron.

Harry nodded vigorously in agreement. "Yes, it's awesome."

They loaded their trunks onto the train. The twins turned up briefly to give the boys a hand with their heavy trunks and then ran off again to seek out friends they had not seen over the summer. Harry thought that Ron was incredibly lucky to have such a loving family. Ron seemed irritated with his brothers half the time and took for granted that his brothers were there to help him. But Harry knew that casual kindness was not a given. Dudley would have stood by and laughed at Harry's struggling to put up his trunk and would never have thought to help.

The boys hopped back on to the platform to say goodbye to Mrs. Weasley and Ginny before the train pulled out. Harry hung back shyly, unsure what to do as he watched Mrs. Weasley hug Ron and then scrub at Ron's nose to remove some dirt. Harry's eyes met Ginny's and she smiled at him, silently sharing her amusement at Ron's struggles against his mother's nose scrubbing. Harry wasn't used to people smiling at him so easily and he didn't immediately know how to respond. By the time he registered that he should smile back, the moment had passed and Ron had escaped his mother's clutches.

Mrs. Weasley's attention had now turned to Harry and he wondered with alarm whether she was going to scrub his face too. His eyes wide behind his glasses, Harry watched anxiously as Mrs. Weasley approached him. But she simply smoothed down his hair with her hand, and smiled kindly at him. "Have a good year, Mark."

"Thanks," Harry whispered shakily over the lump in his throat. He could not recall ever having someone touch his hair with such kindness. Unexpectedly, a sharp stab of longing for his own mother had swelled up in his heart. He swallowed hard over the lump in his throat. Turning a bit blindly back to the train, he mumbled a quick goodbye over his shoulder to Mrs. Weasley and Ginny.

Ron was already a few steps ahead of Harry and was eagerly climbing back on to the train. Ron ran into the compartment he and Harry had staked out for their own and, opening the window, stuck his head out and called a loud goodbye to his mother and sister. Harry felt uncomfortable about joining him, and settled for giving a short wave from over Ron's shoulder.

The train gave a loud toot and started to pull out of the station, and Harry sat down hard in his seat, gripping the edges with his hands. Ron turned away from the window and looked at Harry, sitting rigidly, back straight, face strained and with his knuckles turning white from his death grip on the seat. Ron nodded in silent understanding and just said, "It's going to be a great year, Mark. Everyone loves Hogwarts."

Harry nodded but said nothing and the two boys sat in companionable silence as the train left Kings Cross. Minutes passed in silence and then Ron started talking about some of the wonderful things he was looking forward to doing at Hogwarts, chief among them was flying lessons. He then started to explain the intricacies of Quidditch, which sounded very confusing to Harry but which Ron assured him was a wonderful game.

When the food cart passed, Harry purchased a few treats to share with his new friend. He justified the purchase by thinking that the scholarship money was for school supplies but that he was using the money from his restaurant job to buy these little extras. If he had had parents, they would have given him some spending money surely? Besides, he needed to learn about the wizarding world and eating Bertie Botts Every Flavor Bean or Chocolate Frogs was like doing research. Satisfied with his internal debate, Harry settled down to enjoy his treats.

To allay any feelings of guilt, Harry diligently studied all the information on the wizards in the Chocolate Frog cards that he had unwrapped. He stared intently at his first card, in which Dumbledore stood gazing back at him. So, this was the Headmaster of Hogwarts. He'd be meeting him in person soon. This was the man who had sent him to live with the Dursleys. Harry scowled down at the picture. But, when Ron asked him what was the matter, Harry lied and said "nothing" and turned back to continue chatting casually with Ron.

The time passed quickly as the boys chatted. Harry enjoyed every moment of simply sitting there talking with a friend. As the hours passed, the boys had a few visitors from time to time. Fred and George stopped by to say hi and to introduce their friend Lee Jordan, who showed Harry a tarantula. Percy also had had the same idea to check in on his brother, and Lee quickly hid the box holding the spider behind his back when he saw Percy in the doorway of the train compartment.

Percy looked suspiciously from his twin brothers to Lee, but they gazed back at him with innocent expressions. Percy had lived with Fred and George too long to be fooled but he couldn't see anything wrong, so he just turned his attention to his youngest brother. "Hi,

Ron.” Politely, he nodded to Harry too. “Hi, Mark. Both settling in okay? No problems?”

Both boys chorused that everything was fine. “I’m checking all the compartments to make sure that the first years have no questions. As a prefect, I think this extra bit of attention helps calm nerves.”

Fred snorted at Percy’s pompous tone. “You’re just trying to see if Harry Potter is on the train.” Harry had not been expecting the mention of his name and he jumped and gasped aloud. Luckily, no one was looking at him at the time and his gasp was not noticed under the exchange of conversation between the brothers.

“I don’t know what you mean,” said Percy stiffly.

“Give it up, Perce,” said George. “Everyone knows that Harry Potter is not coming to Hogwarts this year. Even if he managed to survive leaving his aunt and uncle’s house, no one knows where he is and he’s not on the Hogwarts list of registered students this year.”

The other boys looked sad and a short silence filled the compartment. “Who’s Harry Potter?” Harry asked. He judged it safe to ask the question. Wouldn’t any muggleborn ask this?

Immediately, all five boys tried explaining, happy to have a new audience for this thrilling story. The competing voices filled the air. Finally, Percy said, “Enough! I’ll go first and you lot can finish the story.” At their reluctant nods, Percy started, “Harry Potter is a boy who, as a baby, defeated the greatest Dark Lord the wizarding world has ever known. You-Know-Who killed his parents and tried to kill him, but, for a reason no one knows, the curse bounced off baby Harry and killed You-Know-Who instead. Harry was such a hero, there were loads of wizards willing to raise him in their family. I know our parents would have loved to have him! But, instead, Harry was sent to live with his aunt and uncle who are muggles. A lot of people were angry about this at the time. After all, muggles! But, Harry’s parents had made no will and the law clearly states that an orphan needs to go to the nearest relative, unless the parents have provided for differently in a will.”

Fred couldn't stay silent any longer and he took up the story. "Dumbledore was the one who placed Harry with his relatives. Over this summer, Dumbledore actually faced an inquiry at the Ministry about putting Harry with his relatives, because it turns out that they weren't a good family at all. The public is really angry and the Ministry wants to blame Dumbledore."

Percy stiffened at this criticism of the government. "They were just doing their job – trying to find out why such a mistake had been made! Anyway, even the Ministry had to admit that Dumbledore hadn't any choice really. The law is the law."

George piped up. "If they had known that the aunt and uncle were so awful, they wouldn't have left Harry with them of course. But, they didn't know until this summer, when the wards on the house mysteriously dropped one day."

At Harry's puzzled expression, Ron explained, "The wards are the protections that they had put up over the house where Harry was living; to protect him from Death Eaters,..." Ron's voice had lowered as he rolled the words "Death Eaters" in his mouth, as if telling a ghost story. In thrilling tones, he continued, "...the followers of You-Know-Who."

Lee, feeling left out, added to the story. "Everyone's looking for Harry now, but no one has any idea where he is. All tracking spells are failing and no owl has been able to find him. Some people think he's dead."

The Weasley boys all objected and, once again, a cacophony of voices filled the compartment. Finally, Percy restored order and continued, "Harry was supposed to start Hogwarts this year. There's still a possibility that he found a way to make his way to Hogwarts and will be there." At Fred's skeptical look, Percy said, stung, "I'm not the only one who thinks so! The Ministry is sending a representative to the sorting tonight. He'll be watching all the students, just in case somehow Harry Potter has come to Hogwarts."

As the other boys questioned Percy about his knowledge of the Ministry official, Harry considered the information he had learned. So,

everyone was willing to forgive Dumbledore for sticking him with the Dursleys. They were quick to forgive because they hadn't been the ones forced to live with Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon. Dumbledore or the Ministry or whoever should have checked up on Harry. He had been there for 10 years! But, never once as far as he knew had anyone bothered to find out if he was doing well. The Weasley boys and Lee Jordan might be talking about Harry Potter as if he were some sort of hero, but the wizarding world had turned their backs on him soon enough.

Harry was glad to know that a Ministry official would be at the school that night. He'd have to be careful not to do or say anything that might give himself away. But, well-prepared was well-armed. He would now be expecting someone to try to uncover his secret and he'd be ready to avoid disclosure.

It was strange hearing about his life from the other boys. Although Harry knew that they were recounting the events of his own life, it seemed like the story of someone else. Harry didn't remember killing the Dark Lord of course. It gave him a strange feeling to know that so many people thought of him as a hero. He was used to the Dursleys telling him that he was worthless.

"If," Harry thought, "I could just make sure that this Dark Lord is really dead, I'll be able to be Harry Potter again and everyone will love me."

Harry's daydreams about being welcomed as a hero by the wizarding world filled his head pleasantly for the next hour or two. He and Ron were left to themselves for most of the ride. They did say hello briefly to a muggleborn girl, Hermione Granger, who stopped by to look for a toad lost by another boy. Ron seemed to think she was a bit too pompous and reminded him of Percy. But, Harry thought she seemed nice.

Hermione had come bursting into the compartment, swinging her bushy hair and filled with slightly manic energy. Harry, used to feeling awkward in groups of his peers, quickly recognized Hermione's under-confidence. She was using her hunt for the toad to cover up her lack of friends, Harry thought. He noticed that she wasn't searching for "Trevor" with the owner of the toad or with any other

friend, for that matter. She was wandering from car to car, pretending that she had an important job to do so that she didn't have to sit in a compartment either alone or with other children she probably felt didn't like her.

After both boys denied ever having seen a toad, there was an awkward silence and then, "I'm Hermione Granger. And you are?"

"I'm Ron Weasley," the boy said politely.

Hermione looked at his red hair and said, "Do you have any brothers on this train? I think I saw twin boys and a prefect who looked like they might be related to you."

Glumly, Ron admitted that yes, he was one of a number of Weasleys going to Hogwarts. Hermione said, "I'm an only. I didn't even know I was a witch or there was such a place as Hogwarts until I received my letter. I didn't have any older brothers or sisters already going."

Harry heard the underlying nervousness in her voice. He knew that Ron couldn't understand how scary it was for a muggleborn to attend Hogwarts. But Harry knew exactly how Hermione was feeling. So, he smiled kindly and offered his hand to shake hers. "Hi. I'm Mark Twist. Don't worry. I'm a muggleborn too. I think you'll find that we're not the only ones either."

Hermione shook his hand and smiled back. "Oh, I'm not worried," she said, although Harry thought he detected a hint of relief in her eyes. "I've been reading through the course work over the summer, and I think I have a good handle on it. Anyway, I better keep looking for Trevor. See you later."

Dutifully, the boys said goodbye. Ron was irritated by the fact that any student would study over the summer and seemed to hold this against Hermione. Harry, however, understood Hermione's need to try to gain some control over the situation. He had every intention of studying as hard as possible himself. He, too, wanted to "catch up" to the purebloods, who had grown up knowing and taking for granted so much of what he still had to learn. He also needed every advantage

he could find if he were going to have to worry about Dark Lords and Death Eaters.

There was one very unpleasant encounter on the train. A few hours before they reached Hogsmeade station, where they would be disembarking, the door opened and a sharp faced, blond haired boy stepped inside, followed by two other, larger boys. The boy looked around the compartment and immediately determined that the two inside were not important. "I know who you are," he said to Ron with a nasty tone. "You're a Weasley!" With a haughty tone, he continued, pompously, "I'm Draco Malfoy." A beat passed and then he said, "My father is Lucius Malfoy." He waited, as if expecting Ron and Mark to be very impressed.

Ron muttered under his breath, "Big deal." Draco disregarded him, however, and turned his attention to Mark. "Who are you?" he demanded.

"I'm Mark Twist," said Harry. Reluctantly, he held out his hand to shake Draco's but Draco ignored him.

"Who are your family?" Draco inquired. At Harry's puzzled look, he continued, "Are your parents wizards?"

Harry shook his head. "No, I'm muggleborn," he lied.

Draco's eyes narrowed and he sneered at Harry. "Merlin! Hogwarts is going to the dogs! Half this train seems to be filled with mudbloods! I should've gone to Durmstrang, where they have the right idea about educating only purebloods."

Ron had jumped up at the word "mudbloods". Angrily, he clenched his fists and said to Draco, "Get out of here. I wish you had gone to Durmstrang too! Don't ever use the word 'mudblood' around me!"

Draco's bodyguards took a threatening step forward. Draco lazily waved them back. "It's okay. I'm going. I have no interest in staying here. My father says your whole family are blood traitors, Weasley, and I can see it's true. Hanging out with a mudblood," he said the

word deliberately, obviously baiting Ron, “and the school year hasn’t even started.”

He left the compartment, taking his cronies with him. Ron’s face was red and he was obviously holding on to his temper with difficulty. Turning to Harry, he said, “Just ignore him. Luckily, not all wizards are like him, but unfortunately there are other purebloods like him that think they’re special just because their parents and grandparents were wizards. But, children born to muggles can be just as magical as children born to wizards,” he assured Harry.

Harry savored the feeling of having a friend defend him. Draco Malfoy reminded Harry all too much of his cousin, Dudley. But, when Dudley had harassed him, no one had come to Harry’s defense. He was used to being taunted and abused, so Draco didn’t bother him. But, he could see that Ron was still upset. He tried to soothe him, “Don’t worry. I won’t let him bother me. He’s just full of himself. But, what’s a mudblood?”

Ron’s face turned redder, if that was possible. “It’s a foul word for muggleborns,” he explained. “If a prefect had heard Draco using that word, he would have gotten detention, for sure.” Ron was quiet for a minute, obviously savoring the thought of Draco in detention.

Finally, forcing himself to calm down, Ron sat again and said, “Anyway, if we’re lucky, we won’t have to see him too much. I’m sure that he’ll be in Slytherin house and I’m probably going to be in Gryffindor. I sure hope you’re in Gryffindor too.”

“What do you mean?”

“Oh, that’s right. You don’t know. Well, all the students are sorted into four groups, called houses. This is the group you sleep with, have dinner with and have classes with. Gryffindor is for the brave. My parents and all of my brothers were sorted into Gryffindor. If I don’t get in there, I think that I’ll be disowned!” Although Ron said this, it was clear to Harry that he wasn’t really worried. It must be nice, was Harry’s fleeting thought, to be so comfortable that your family loves you not to worry that they would ever abandon you.

Ron continued, "I really hope that we're both in the same house. Ravenclaw is for the brainiacs, Hufflepuff for the loyal and hardworking and Slytherin is for the sly and ambitious. Almost all of You-Know-Who's supporters came from Slytherin. Malfoy's dad was a known supporter of You-Know-Who, too. I bet Draco ends up in Slytherin."

Harry said, loyally, "Well, I hope we're in the same house too. Let's both be sorted into Gryffindor!"

Ron smiled. "We can't choose. There's some sort of test, or something, that determines what house we're placed in. Fred and George said we have to fight a troll, but I don't believe them." He looked a bit uncertain despite his words.

Harry now had a new worry to think about. What kind of test? What if he were placed in the same house as that awful Draco Malfoy? Had he finally made his first friend in the world to be separated from him?

Luckily, the boys couldn't spend too much time worrying because the train started slowing down and they realized that they still needed to get into their robes. The last few minutes passed in a flurry of activity, as the boys quickly pulled their trunks down from the overhead rack and changed into their school robes.

AN – Hope you're enjoying! If you only knew how much authors love to hear feedback on their stories, you wouldn't hesitate to click on the review button below. Even a simple message is very much appreciated. Thanks!

Chapter Four – Year One; The Sorting

When the train stopped, Harry and Ron were among the first off the train. At first, there was a flurry of activity, as all of the children bustled around and confusion reigned. Within a short time, the older students sorted themselves out and started heading toward carriages waiting to take them to Hogwarts. Harry heard a deep voice boom, “First years over ’ere!”

Looking for the owner of the voice, Harry saw Hagrid, dressed in his moleskin coat and looking as unkempt as ever. Harry noticed a number of his fellow first years looking at Hagrid with wide, fear-filled eyes. Harry smiled to himself. Here, at least, he had the advantage over his classmates. He had already met Hagrid and knew him to be a kind soul.

Hagrid spotted Harry and called out a cheery greeting. “Wotcher, Mark! Everythin’ go alright? Did you like the ’ogwarts Express?”

Harry nodded and called back, “It was great, Hagrid. Thanks!” A few of other students looked admiringly at Harry, impressed that he knew the giant man.

As Hagrid waved the first year students to join him, Harry and Ron moved to the front to crowd around the gamekeeper. Other students followed reluctantly, not eager to be too close to the frightening man. Smiling kindly down at them, Hagrid explained that they were to take boats across the dark, forbidding lake to reach Hogwarts. While eyes widened still more fearfully upon hearing this information, no one had the nerve to object.

So, a short while later, the students found themselves crossing the lake and seeing their first view of Hogwarts castle. Harry gazed up at the awesome sight and felt a lump rise in his throat. He was overcome with emotion. Somehow, this impressive place that he had never seen before seemed liked home. It seemed to Harry as if the castle were waiting for him, and as eager to meet him as he was to meet it.

When Harry and the other students scrambled out of the boats, upon reaching the castle, they were met by an older woman, stiff-backed and stern looking. She introduced herself as Professor McGonagall. Harry recognized the name from his admissions letter to Hogwarts.

Although she seemed a bit scary to some of the children (one round-faced boy holding a toad seemed to be shaking), Harry could tell that Professor McGonagall wasn't a mean woman. Harry was an expert at reading the nature of adults around him. He knew that this woman was stern in a no-nonsense sort of way. Not like his Aunt Petunia, who was stern in a "I don't like you and never will" way.

When Professor McGonagall's eyes fell on him, Harry offered a tentative smile. She smiled slightly in response and Harry saw a little flicker of surprise in her eyes. He bet that she was used to most students being too scared of her to smile.

Harry listened carefully as Professor McGonagall explained that they would be ushered into the Great Hall where they would try on a Sorting Hat and learn what house they would be in. Harry wasn't sure whether he should be relieved or not. Yes, he was glad that the test wasn't something frightening but what if the Sorting Hat put him in Slytherin?

When the doors to the Great Hall flung wide, Harry's breath caught in his throat. He heard gasps from the other children too. It was beautiful! Candles hung in mid-air and the ceiling was enchanted to look like the night sky. (At least, that's what he overheard Hermione Granger explain to another student.) Harry marched with his fellow first years through the Hall, past the tables filled with older students who looked curiously at the new kids, to stand in front of a long table where the Headmaster and teachers were sitting.

Harry looked curiously at the Headmaster. So this was Albus Dumbledore! He had a long flowing beard and radiated authority. Right now, he was bestowing a grandfatherly, benevolent smile on the first years, silently offering his reassurances to them. Harry thought to himself that the Headmaster seemed so kind. But, he would be careful about trusting him. This was the man who had condemned him to ten miserable years with abusive relatives. Harry

didn't smile back when Dumbledore's eyes passed over him, having been looking over the other students as well. But, Harry knew that the Headmaster just attributed Harry's lack of response to the boy's nervousness. Harry knew that many of his fellow students were not smiling either.

Before turning around to face the other students, Harry threw a quick look at the rest of staff table. He noticed that Hagrid had now joined the other teachers and was taking a seat. Harry noticed Professor Quirrell, who he had met at the Leaky Cauldron. He was wearing a strange turban on his head now. What odd fashion sense the man had! There were a number of smiling faces and one teacher, a man with dark greasy hair and large hooked nose, who was scowling in a generally unpleasant way. He doesn't look like he wants to be here, Harry thought to himself.

Continuing his brief survey, Harry noticed one man at the end of the long table who seemed out of place. Unlike the teachers who were wearing robes, this man was dressed in a muggle business suit. For a brief moment, Harry wondered who this could be. Then, it came to him in a flash. This was the representative from the Ministry who Percy had mentioned on the train. He was here to see whether Harry Potter had found his way to Hogwarts after all.

Harry quickly lowered his eyes to the floor, hiding any hint of alarm, and turned around to face the student tables. When he lifted his eyes again, all thoughts of the Ministry official fled his mind. Staring back at him and the other first years were dozens of eyes. Harry was not used to being the center of so much attention. And, whenever in the past, attention was focused on him, it was usually unpleasant. Taking a deep gulp, Harry held himself still and lifted his chin. He was not going to allow anyone to see that he was nervous. He had learned in his brief foray into the adult muggle world this last summer that acting calm made people trust you more.

Unbeknownst to him, Harry's seeming composure brought him more attention than his nervousness would have done. The Headmaster and a number of the teachers noticed the oddly regal stance of the young boy. With his straight back and lifted chin, he looked as if he dared anyone to find fault. "A little prince," thought the scowling

teacher, dismissively. "So mature," thought Professor McGonagall. "A born leader," thought Professor Dumbledore.

A three legged stool was brought out and a tattered, old hat was placed upon it. Harry was as startled as the other first years when the hat started singing a song. After singing a clever poem about the traits of the four houses, the hat fell silent and the hall erupted in applause. Professor McGonagall pulled out a scroll and started calling out names to try on the hat and be sorted.

After a number of names had been called and those children had joined their new houses, Professor McGonagall hesitated. She stared at the parchment and then looked up and said, "Potter, Harry." There was immediate silence in the room. Everyone held their breath and Harry noticed that a number of the teachers leaned forward in their seats. The Ministry official actually stood up and Harry saw the man's head swivel as he looked all around the Great Hall. Did they think that Harry was hiding in a corner of the room waiting for his cue to enter center stage? They were being ridiculous!

The moments passed and no one answered the call. Whispers broke out and the sounds of rustling began to fill the room as children squirmed in their seats. Seeming to hold back tears, Professor McGonagall called the next name on the list.

As Harry waited patiently for his turn, he felt a strange tug at his mind. It was almost like someone whispering. He tilted his head slightly and tried to hear. After a brief moment, he realized that someone was trying to peer inside his head. He took a step back in surprise. Who? He looked around but he could tell nothing from the sea of students facing him. They seemed to be looking at the girl currently poised on the stool waiting to be sorted. Another tug at his mind. Behind him?

Cautiously, Harry peered over his shoulder and tried to see if someone was looking at him. Immediately, Harry's eyes were captured by the eyes of the Ministry official. The man seemed surprised that Harry was looking at him. Immediately, the tug on his mind stopped and the man seemed a little flustered. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry noticed that Professor Dumbledore was staring back and forth between Harry and the Ministry representative.

“Twist, Mark!” Harry heard his name called and turned around. Behind him, Dumbledore sat up straighter in his chair. So, this was the boy who Ollivander had told him now possessed the twin wand to Voldemort’s. He, Dumbledore, had been struck so immediately as to the boy’s leadership qualities. And, he had just witnessed the boy reacting to what was obviously an attempt by Mr. Croning from the Ministry to use legilimency on him. The boy possessed very advanced magic indeed if he could tell when legilimency was being employed. Add this to the strange circumstance of the boy’s name not appearing on the Hogwarts attendance list until just a few weeks before the start of term and, yes, he must keep a very careful eye on this boy!

Harry sat on the stool and placed the Sorting Hat on his head. It fell over his eyes and he felt it immediately rifling through his thoughts. “You’ve got plenty of courage, I see. But, what a thirst for knowledge! And your desire for friendship is even greater! So, Gryffindor, Ravenclaw or Hufflepuff would all suit you. Which one? But, wait...” It hesitated and then, drawing out its words, sounding very impressed, it said, “You are a sly one, aren’t you?”

Harry froze. Did this mean that the Sorting Hat had discovered his secret? Would the hat say something to Dumbledore? But, the hat, hearing his thoughts, reassured the boy. “Your secrets are safe with me, Harry. I am here only to decide which house would suit you best. And, Slytherin is obviously the house for you!”

The Sorting Hat opened its brim to shout out its decision, but Harry yelled inside his mind, “Wait! Not Slytherin! Please!”

The Sorting Hat hesitated. “Why not Slytherin? Slytherin can help you on the path to greatness.”

Harry pleaded, “I don’t want to go to a house filled with people who hate muggleborns. Can’t I be in Gryffindor? My friend Ron thinks he’ll be sorted there and I want to be with him. Please?”

The Sorting Hat considered the request. "Well, you would do well in any house. If you want Gryffindor, why not?" Opening its brim a second time, it yelled out, "Gryffindor!"

Harry smiled as he pulled off the hat and joined the Gryffindor table, where polite applause had greeted his sorting. The Weasley boys all shook his hand warmly and Harry hoped with all his heart that Ron would, indeed, be sorted into this house too.

Meanwhile, Dumbledore looked curiously at the new Gryffindor. The Sorting Hat's hesitation had not gone unnoticed by him. It was clear that the Sorting Hat had initially planned on sorting Mark Twist into a different house and that the boy had convinced the hat to sort him into Gryffindor instead. What house had the Sorting Hat wanted to put the boy in? Slytherin? And the boy had rejected that choice, electing Gryffindor. Interesting!

The sorting ended and, after a few short words from him, the students began eating. Dumbledore noticed how happy Mark Twist was when Ron Weasley joined him at the Gryffindor table. Well, the Weasleys were a pureblood family with a strong commitment to the Light side. It was very encouraging that the boy wanted to be friends with the Weasleys.

Harry sensed eyes upon him and looked up at staff table. He could have sworn that the Headmaster had been staring at him. If that was true, though, the Headmaster had looked away before Harry could catch him. Instead, Harry watched as the Headmaster signaled to the Ministry official to approach his chair. The wizard leaned over Dumbledore's shoulder to whisper in his ear. Harry knew that he must be speaking about him because the man's eyes flickered briefly to him. However, Dumbledore did not glance at Harry again and, after a short while, Harry turned his attention back to his meal, happily eating the delicious food and chatting with his new friends.

Harry met the other boys in his year, besides Ron and himself, who had been sorted into Gryffindor: Seamus Finnegan, Dean Thomas and Neville Longbottom. Dean thought he was muggleborn, but he said he wasn't sure because he didn't know his father. Seamus was "half-and-half," and Neville was a pureblood. It was clear that Neville

was extremely scared at starting school. Harry was a bit surprised that even a pureblood was nervous. It just goes to show, he thought to himself, that everyone is scared. Knowing that the other children were worried too made Harry feel more confident himself.

Recalling another nervous student, Harry glanced around to see how Hermione Granger was doing. Surprisingly, she had been sorted into Gryffindor. He would have thought Ravenclaw would have been the house for her. He saw that Hermione was sitting further down the table. She was too far away for him to hear her, but he could tell from her mannerisms that her manic energy was still strong. He hoped that she would calm down because, he suspected, she would be a bit off-putting to her fellow students if she continued at this frantic pace.

Surreptitiously throughout the meal, Dumbledore kept an eye on Mark Twist. He was not an attractive child. His nose was a tad too big, he wore glasses, and his coloring was dull. Dumbledore had the fleeting thought that at least this boy wouldn't attract followers based on just his handsome looks, as Tom Riddle had done when Tom had been a student at Hogwarts. But, power was a strong pull as well, and it might well be that this boy possessed unique skill.

Croning had confirmed what Dumbledore suspected had occurred during the sorting hat ceremony. The boy had sensed that someone was trying to use legilimency on him. None of the other students had realized that Croning had been looking into their minds on the bizarre, off-chance that Harry Potter had somehow disguised himself to attend Hogwarts. Unfortunately, Croning hadn't learned anything interesting from his brief foray into Mark's mind. He was just a muggleborn boy excited about his first day at Hogwarts. Dumbledore thought it was a shame that the Sorting Hat wouldn't share any information that it learned during the sorting process. Some sort of magical sorting hat-student privilege, apparently. Dumbledore would love to know what insight the hat may learned about the boy. Oh, well.

It's strange how things turn out, Dumbledore mused. Instead of welcoming Harry Potter, who was the hope of the Light, he was worrying instead about a different boy who gave some signs at least that he could be a new dark wizard. And where was Harry? He was heartsick worrying about that boy. He had known that the Dursleys

wouldn't be the kindest of foster parents to Harry, but never had he suspected that they would actively abuse the boy. What a fatal mistake!

Pushing aside his morose mood, Dumbledore rose and welcomed the students to a new year at Hogwarts. Knowing how tired the children would be, he kept his speech short and sent them off to bed. He cast one last considering glance at Mark Twist as the boy left the Hall, following the Gryffindor prefects to his new quarters. Tired himself, Dumbledore said goodnight to his staff and took himself off to his own rooms.

AN – Thanks for reading! As always, I truly welcome reviews.

Chapter Five – Year One; Settling In

Harry settled into Hogwarts quickly. He found his way around the castle without any problem after only a day or two of being confused by the winding passages. It took the other first year students a few weeks before they knew their way around as well.

Harry also settled into a routine of school work very quickly. Most of his classes were interesting, but with lots of homework. Of his teachers, only Professor Snape was not very nice. He was the teacher Harry had noticed the first night who had seemed so grumpy. It was clear that he did not like children and Harry wondered why he had chosen to become a teacher.

Harry studied extra hard for Snape's Potions class so that he wouldn't be caught unprepared if Snape asked him a question. Snape enjoyed asking students difficult questions and ridiculing those who didn't know the answers. Harry knew that he had Snape's grudging respect because Snape generally left him alone in class. Snape delighted in badgering poor Neville, who was a terrible student in Potions, and in sniping at Hermione Granger, who was too pushy in her eagerness to prove herself. Harry did his homework diligently, carefully prepared the potions assignments in class, and only answered questions when Snape addressed him directly.

Harry was determined to learn as much about the wizarding world as he could, as quickly as he could. Ron bemoaned Harry's tendency to study in the evenings and weekends, rather than playing wizards' chess or some other game. But, nothing could have scandalized Ron more than when "Mark" turned down the position of seeker on the Gryffindor Quidditch team.

The excitement had all been caused by Draco Malfoy's being such a jerk. Gryffindor and Slytherin first years were scheduled to share flying class. In the very first class, Neville Longbottom had kicked off too quickly and had lost control of his broom, falling and breaking his wrist. Madam Hooch had taken Neville to the hospital wing, telling the class sternly not to try any flying while she was away. Draco had spotted Neville's Remembrall, which had dropped out of Neville's robes when he had come crashing to the ground.

“Look,” he told the class, holding the Remembrall above his head. “It’s that stupid thing Longbottom’s gran sent him.”

Harry stepped forward and said, “Give that here, Malfoy.”

Draco sneered at Harry, “Are you talking to me, Twist? I don’t listen to mudbloods!” Draco ignored the gasps from the other students at his use of the foul word. “I think I’ll leave it somewhere for Longbottom to collect – how about – up a tree?”

Draco mounted his broom and quickly soared high above the watching students. Without stopping to think, Harry grabbed his broom, mounted, kicked off and rose quickly into the air. It was clear that Draco had not expected Harry to be able to follow him. However, Draco was not about to allow a mudblood to tell him what to do. He flew in circles, avoiding his pursuer. But, however Draco twisted, Harry followed and it was evident that he would soon be able to grab the Remembrall from Draco’s hand. To avoid the humiliating defeat, Draco took the Remembrall and threw it far and high, saying “Catch it if you can, then!” Having thrown the ball, Draco then flew back down to the ground and dismounted among his fellow Slytherins.

Harry watched as the Remembrall soared high into the air. Pointing his broom in the direction of the arc of its descent, Harry dove after the ball. With the wind in his face, blowing his hair back against his head, Harry felt a freedom he had never known. This was the most exhilarating experience of his life! He wished he could fly for hours. Eyes narrowed against the glare of the sun, he targeted the Remembrall in his sights and gave chase. This was fun! He swerved to intercept the ball, accelerating with precision, catching the ball handily, and pulling up a few feet before the ground leveled. He dismounted with ease.

Harry barely had time to grin with triumph, however, before he saw to his horror that Professor McGonagall was sweeping toward him. Her jaw was clenched and her face was pale. Uh oh!

The boy stood quietly, without moving, as his head of house approached. The other students watched breathlessly from a few

yards away. Draco's eyes glittered and he smirked maliciously. Harry saw Draco's sneer out of the corner of his eye and he resolved that he would not give him the satisfaction of showing any nervousness. However, it would have been clear to anyone standing close to the boy that he was worried, as his eyes gave him away.

"Twist!" said Professor McGonagall. "That was the most brilliant flying I've ever seen. You had no right to be on the broom, of course, and I never want to see you flying without a teacher present again. But, as head of Gryffindor house, I would be remiss if I didn't focus on the greater message here. You are meant to be seeker! I'm going to take you to see Oliver Wood right now." At Harry's puzzled expression, she explained, "Wood is Gryffindor Quidditch captain."

She turned to lead Harry to meet Oliver Wood, but Harry stopped her. "I'm sorry, Professor. But, I don't understand. What do you mean I am meant to be seeker?"

Harry was vaguely aware that the other students were whispering excitedly among themselves and that Draco looked furious. But, Harry focused on Professor McGonagall, who had turned back to face him. "Of course, Twist. I forgot that you are muggleborn and wouldn't understand. Quidditch, you may have heard, is one of our favorite sports. Here at Hogwarts, each house has a Quidditch team, and they compete to win the Quidditch cup each year. A seeker plays a key position on the team. Gryffindor needs a new seeker this year and you are obviously meant to be that seeker. You would be the youngest player in a century but you are clearly a natural! What talent!"

Draco's mouth twisted in disgust and envy. The other students listened wide-eyed at the extravagant praise.

Harry had indeed already heard of Quidditch. It was immensely popular at the school. But, Harry knew that any sports team would require a lot of practice, and he didn't want to take so much time away from his studies. He also was concerned about attracting too much attention. Already, he could see from a quick glance at the other students shamelessly listening to the conversation that he was being regarded with awe (and, in the case of Draco, increasing

dislike). In the persona of Mark Twist, Harry had not wanted to stand out. The last thing he wished to do was to attract attention. And, unfortunately, he already suspected that he had attracted attention, what with his name appearing on the Hogwarts registry so unexpectedly.

Quietly, Harry said, "I'm sorry, Professor. But, I'm not interested in being on the team."

Silence reigned for what seemed, to Harry, to be an eternity. Then, exclamations of dismay from the listening Gryffindors filled the air. Ron's cry of "Are you crazy?" was so loud, it was easily heard over the other students' protests. Professor McGonagall stared in shock at Harry. Clearly, she had never expected that any student would turn down a chance to play seeker. "But...but..." she spluttered. She took a breath and regained her composure. "But why not?"

"I think being on a team would take too much time, Professor. I'm more interested in keeping up my grades than in playing a sport."

Professor McGonagall was taken aback but wasn't willing to give up yet. "Other students have been able to balance schoolwork with sports, Twist."

"I don't feel that I could do the same, ma'am. As you know, I'm muggleborn and I feel that I have a lot of studying to do to catch up to some of my classmates. Maybe, next year. But, this year, I'd like to concentrate on my studies."

"I see." Professor McGonagall's eyes were wide in shock and disappointment. "Well, if that's your decision..."

"Yes, ma'am, it is."

"You don't want to think about it some more?" she asked hopefully.

"No, ma'am," Harry said, firmly.

"All right, then. I am disappointed." She turned to go back inside the castle, but then looked back over her shoulder. "I'll be hoping for next

year, Twist,” she promised. “Class, you are dismissed. I’ll tell Madam Hooch that I let you leave. It seems that she’s been delayed and there’s no point in your remaining here.” So saying, Professor McGonagall marched back into the castle.

The Slytherins trailed back into the castle, with Draco sneering at Harry over his shoulder. Under his breath, he muttered, “Show off!”

But, Harry didn’t notice Draco. He was too busy fending off the furious words of his fellow Gryffindors; “How could you?” “Are you nuts?” among the questions thrown at him.

Ron moaned, “For studying! Giving up Quidditch for studying!”

Hermione chimed in, “Well, I for one admire you, Mark.”

“You would!” snorted Ron.

“Everyone, everyone!” Harry had to raise his voice slightly to be heard over the other students. “I’m sorry, but I’ve made my decision. I’m not playing Quidditch.”

Reluctantly accepting Harry’s decision, the Gryffindors headed back to the castle, grumbles slowly subsiding as they approached the door. “I hope you know what you’re doing,” warned Ron.

“I do,” promised Harry.

Although he couldn’t admit it to Ron or anyone else, Harry was not as calm about his decision not to play Quidditch as he wanted to appear. In the privacy of his thoughts, he mourned the lost opportunity. He knew he would have loved it. Flying! Everyone cheering for him! He could almost taste the triumph of a winning game. But, it was dangerous. He knew it. He had to keep a low profile. He had to focus on learning. It was the only way to survive. He ruthlessly suppressed daydreams of sports victories in which he would win the day in the last second of the game, to the delight of the cheering fans. Instead, almost as a punishment, he forced himself to spend the rest of the day inside the library, learning the history of Goblin rebellions.

Harry would have been upset to learn that his refusal to be on the Gryffindor team attracted the very attention he sought to avoid. Dumbledore had overheard Professor McGonagall bemoaning Mark Twist's refusal to join the team at lunch later that day. "Can you believe that anyone would turn down being seeker?" Professor McGonagall asked Professor Sprout.

Before Professor Sprout could do more than tsk sympathetically, Dumbledore had interrupted. "I'm sorry to interrupt, Minerva. But, did I overhear you to say that you had asked Mark Twist to be the Gryffindor house seeker and he refused?"

"That's right, Albus!" said Professor McGonagall, turning to find another sympathetic listener. "You wouldn't believe what a natural flyer that boy is! I don't believe I've ever seen a better. It was his first flying lesson and he moved as one with that broom! But, when I told him I wanted him to be seeker, he looked shocked and then said, thank you, but he didn't want to play sports at school."

"Did he give you a reason why?" Dumbledore pressed.

"Yes. He said that he wanted to devote more time to his studies. Well, as his teacher, I couldn't very well tell him not to spend more time studying, now could I?"

Dumbledore "hmmed" in response, but was saved from responding when Professor McGonagall's attention was caught by Professor Sprout again and the two teachers began discussing another topic. Left to his own musings, Professor Dumbledore once again found himself thinking about the strange boy, Mark Twist. It was a very unusual 11 year old boy who would turn down such an honor. Was his excuse of wanting to study a pretext? Or, was he telling the truth? If the truth, why so studious? Even a Ravenclaw would have jumped at the chance of being on a Quidditch team. What an unusual boy!

As the weeks passed, Harry found that he enjoyed studying. It was satisfying to master a spell or brew a perfect potion and homework was not as daunting when he paced himself throughout the week. He did not fear being called on in any class because he usually knew the answers.

He became friendly with Hermione Granger, who was often in the library studying as well. With Harry as the buffer, Ron slowly warmed to Hermione. However, Ron didn't enjoy spending his nights as studiously as Harry and Hermione and he became friendly with Seamus and Dean, oftentimes spending the evenings playing games in the corner of the Gryffindor common room with those boys.

In the library, Harry surreptitiously researched any history about Harry Potter that he could find. The books confirmed what he had learned from Hagrid and the Weasleys. Interestingly, the books did not mention the prophecy his aunt had told him about. In *Notable Magical Names of Our Time*, Harry unexpectedly came across a picture of his parents. He had turned the page and there it was. He felt as if someone had punched him in the stomach. There. Smiling up at him. His parents, holding an infant Harry.

The picture had obviously been taken shortly before their deaths. They looked so young. His mother – Harry touched the picture reverently – she was so beautiful. And his father! With the same dark messy hair that Harry had. And he wore glasses too!

James looked so happy. His arm draped around Lily's shoulder, he stared straight into the camera, smiling widely – so proud of his little family. Baby Harry waved his fists in the air and smiled innocently.

Looking at the happy group, Harry felt the force of all that he had lost. With a trembling hand, he traced the faces of his parents. It took all his will to close the book and return it to the library shelf. If he had thought he could get away with ripping the photograph out of the book, he would have done so without hesitation. He was worried, however, that Madam Pince had placed enchantments on the books to alert her if they were defaced in any way.

Instead, Harry contented himself with writing to Flourish and Blotts, asking to purchase a copy of the book. In the week before it arrived, he visited the library daily to gaze at the photo. When his own copy was delivered, he tore the page out of the book and carried the photo with him everywhere in a concealed pocket in his robe.

The year passed quietly, with only a few exciting moments. During the Halloween feast, a troll somehow entered the castle. He was eventually stopped by the teachers but his foul smell lingered for a few weeks, giving the students much to chatter about. Professor Snape had apparently been injured in the fight with the troll because the students noticed that he limped for a few days afterwards. However, the one student brave enough to ask Professor Snape how he had gotten hurt had received a detention for being nosy, so no one knew for sure.

Harry was careful to send himself letters from time to time, purportedly from his "parents". At Christmas, which he spent at Hogwarts, he sent himself a few gifts as well. It was an odd experience -- opening up presents that he had sent himself, pretending to be surprised and happy. But, no one was suspicious, which was the important thing.

Harry became very close to Hagrid. Befriending a fellow scholarship student, Hagrid often invited Harry to his hut for tea on Saturdays. Sometimes, Ron or Hermione accompanied him and the three found the gamekeeper to be a very kind-hearted, jovial man. They had been very alarmed, however, when they found that Hagrid had hatched a dragon. Hermione had insisted that they tell Dumbledore and ask him what to do and, after much debate, Harry and Ron reluctantly agreed with her.

After lunch one day, shortly after learning of "Norbert's" existence, the three children approached Professor Dumbledore at the staff table. Harry poked Hermione and she took a gulp and stepped forward, with Ron and Harry flanking her. "Professor Dumbledore, sir."

Professor Dumbledore had watched the three approach him and smiled kindly at them. "Yes, dear? Can I help you?"

"Yes, sir. May we have a moment of your time, please? There's something we wish to discuss with you...in private, if you would, sir."

Surprised, Dumbledore's eyebrows raised. "Of course. Please follow me." He rose from the table and led the three from the Great Hall. They followed in silence, down a few passageways, until they came

to a doorway guarded by a stone griffin. Dumbledore raised his hand to the statue and it sprang aside, revealing a spiral stone staircase behind it. The stairs began to move upward, in a corkscrew manner, until they reached the floor on which Dumbledore had his office.

Politely beckoning them inside, Dumbledore gestured for them to sit in some chairs in front of his desk. Apparently realizing that his guests would be more at ease if he sat down as well, Dumbledore took a seat behind his desk. The children were too nervous to accept Dumbledore's offer of a lemon drop.

Clearing her throat, Hermione said, "Thank you, Professor, for agreeing to see us. We have a delicate matter we need to discuss with you."

Her courage apparently failed her, because she didn't seem to know how to proceed. When the silence started to stretch out uncomfortably, Harry piped up. "We have a friend, Headmaster, who has done something...unwise... and we'd like to help him fix the situation. But, we want to make sure he doesn't get into trouble. If we tell you the problem, would you be able to help us and not punish our friend?"

Dumbledore looked at Harry consideringly. "Who is your friend?"

Harry glanced at Hermione and Ron, who said nothing. "I'm sorry, sir, but I can't tell you until you promise that he won't get into trouble."

"Is this 'friend' really yourself?"

"I can't say yes or no, sir, until you give us your word you won't punish this person."

"I cannot make such a blanket promise, although I will take your concern into consideration before deciding any punishment. Now, please tell me the name of your friend."

"I'm afraid I can't do that, sir." Harry stood up to leave. "Thank you for time, sir, but I think we'll have to figure out what to do on our own."

“Sit down, Mr. Twist.” Harry sat down, reluctantly. “As Headmaster of this school, I’m afraid I must insist. Please tell me who has done something that has obviously broken the rules. If you don’t tell me, I’m afraid I have no choice but to give you detention.”

Harry ignored the gasps of his friends and, pale with anger, eyes sparkling, glared at the Headmaster. “I’m sorry, sir. But, I have nothing to say to you.”

“Even if I were to tell you that you would be expelled?” Dumbledore looked seriously at the boy in front of him.

Harry’s anger fled. He felt his blood run cold and his mouth went dry. He breathed out in shock. “No!” he heard Hermione say.

“We’ll tell you,” said Ron.

But Dumbledore held up a hand to silence Hermione and Ron. “I would like to hear from Mr. Twist,” he said quietly.

Harry had started to shake. He was glad he was sitting, because he didn’t think his legs would support him. If he was expelled, it was back to the boarding house for him. Back to worrying about his every meal and being so lonely, he thought he would choke on it. But, he couldn’t turn in Hagrid. He just couldn’t. What kind of man was Dumbledore? Why had he ever thought to trust him? Because he had stupidly listened to Hermione and Ron, that’s why. They had convinced him that the Headmaster would know what to do and would protect Hagrid. Should he tell Dumbledore that Hagrid had a dragon? Dumbledore liked Hagrid. Maybe, everything would be fine. But, what if Dumbledore decided that Hagrid had finally gone too far? What if he told Hagrid he would have to leave Hogwarts?

Harry opened his mouth and tried to speak. It took him a few attempts, but finally he was able to say, hoarsely, “I’m sorry, sir. But, I can’t tell you.”

Dumbledore nodded solemnly. “I appreciate your loyalty, Mr. Twist. I give you my word that I will not punish the wrongdoer. You may proceed.”

It took the three students a few moments to process that Dumbledore apparently didn't intend to expel Harry after all. Harry was so overwhelmed, Hermione took one look at his face and decided that she should continue speaking. "It's Hagrid, sir. He's hatched a dragon, sir, and is hiding it in his hut."

Dumbledore had not been expecting this. His eyes flew open and, after a minute, started to sparkle with suppressed mirth. "Trust Hagrid to try to hide a dragon." He was silent another minute and then said, "Thank you for telling me. I will speak with Hagrid and I will find another home for the dragon."

"Thank you sir," chorused Ron and Hermione. Harry was silent.

He was incredibly relieved that he was not going to be expelled. But, he was confused. Why had Dumbledore tried to scare him? And, why him so particularly? Dumbledore hadn't tried to get Hermione or Ron to tell him whom they were protecting. It was as if Dumbledore was testing Harry and Harry alone. It was a very cruel trick the Headmaster had played on him. Harry thought it would be days before his heartbeat settled down to a steady beat again.

When Ron and Hermione stood up to leave, Harry dutifully followed. He turned to follow his friends out the door, but Professor Dumbledore called to him, "Mr. Twist. If you don't mind, I'd like to speak with you for a moment." When Ron and Hermione hesitated at the door, the Headmaster addressed them, "Don't worry, your friend will join you in just a minute."

Casting a scared glance at their friend, Ron and Hermione had no choice but to leave the office. Harry sat back down, his heart thumping unpleasantly again. Was he going to get into trouble, after all?

Dumbledore regarded the boy sitting so stiffly in the chair in front of him. It was highly encouraging that the boy had refused to betray a friend.

“Mr. Twist, I’m sorry that I asked you to betray a secret. I apologize for the little drama we just enacted but, to be honest, I wanted to learn a bit more about you. You see, I’m aware that you possess the twin wand to Lord Voldemort’s.” Harry’s mouth dropped open. He had not been expecting this sudden change in topic. And, Dumbledore had said Voldemort’s name! Everyone else referred to the Dark Lord as “You Know You” or “He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named.”

“Yes. Mr. Ollivander wrote to me after you left his shop last August. I was intrigued and, I must admit, a bit alarmed. I wanted to know the character of the boy chosen by this wand. As Mr. Ollivander no doubt told you, the phoenix who gave his tail feather to Lord Voldemort’s wand also gave a feather to just one other wand, yours.”

At this, there was the sound of a soft trill in the corner of the room. It was a sound unlike any Harry had ever heard. It was like a warm drop of hot chocolate on a cold day. It was like he imagined a mother’s hug would be. Looking in the corner, Harry noticed, for the first time, a beautiful bird, slightly hidden by a bookcase.

Dumbledore gestured to the bird. “Ah, Fawkes wants credit. Yes, the phoenix feathers came from this phoenix, here. Fawkes.”

At Harry’s stunned look, Dumbledore chuckled. “I trust, Mr. Twist, that you will use your wand for noble deeds. Thank you again for coming to tell me about Hagrid. I will take care of the problem.”

Understanding that he had been dismissed, Harry rose and, with shaky legs, left the office. Only hours later, after he had reached his room and replayed the conversation in his head for the umpteenth time, did Harry realize that he had been so overwhelmed, he hadn’t even said goodbye to the Headmaster.

True to his word, the Headmaster had arranged a new home for Norbert. Harry was relieved when the dragon was taken away without anyone, apparently, the wiser. Hagrid was hard to console, however. He got drunk the day that Norbert left, and sobbed drunkenly into his ale.

Harry, who was visiting Hagrid for tea, tried unsuccessfully to cheer him up. Tentatively, Harry suggested that, perhaps, Norbert would thrive better in his new home.

"If I can raise a three-headed dog, I can certainly raise a dragon," Hagrid mumbled.

Harry was impressed. "Really, Hagrid. You had a three-headed dog? How cool is that!"

Hagrid was flattered by Harry's admiration. "It was easy to train, once ye knew the trick o' it. Ye just played music and it went right to sleep."

"Where is it now? I'd love to see a three-headed dog."

"Fluffy's up at the school. Maybe I'll take ye to see it someday."

"Up at the school? How come I've never seen it?"

But, at that question, Hagrid seemed to sober somewhat and did not seem pleased that he had even mentioned Fluffy. Harry was sorry to let the topic drop; a three-headed dog would certainly be a sight to see!

The weeks that followed were uneventful. One day, toward the end of term, however, Harry unexpectedly found himself face to face with Lord Voldemort once again.

AN- Hope you enjoyed! All reviews welcome!

Chapter Six – Year One; The Philosopher's Stone

Harry was walking back from the library after a night of studying, close to curfew, when his scar started to prickle uncomfortably. He couldn't see the scar, given his disguise, but he knew where it was on his forehead and the pain he was feeling was definitely coming from that location. He rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand. Perhaps he should detour to the hospital wing and ask for a headache potion?

However, before Harry could decide, he was distracted by whispers in a nearby room. He was surprised to hear voices because it was getting late and he had thought this corridor was deserted. Quietly, he approached the door, which was slightly ajar, and tried to hear what was being said.

It was Professor Quirrell, his Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. What was he doing here? And who was he talking to? Harry listened closely.

"Yes, My Lord. Of course, I'll do as you say. But, are you sure that Professor Dumbledore has left the castle?"

Harry was confused. Professor Quirrell wasn't stuttering. In fact, despite the fearful tone in his voice, he seemed more confident than Harry had ever known him to be. He continued talking, although Harry had not heard anyone give him a response. Harry listened more intently.

"You are right. If Dumbledore is gone, no one will stop us. Professor Snape may have suspected us before, but he has no reason to believe we'll go after the Philosopher's Stone now. He'll be in the dungeon and we can retrieve the stone and be done before anyone knows what we are planning."

Harry's head was spinning. It was clear that Professor Quirrell was planning to steal something – the Philosopher's Stone, whatever that was. He had apparently made sure that Professor Dumbledore was out of the way and was going to be attempting the theft right now.

Harry scrambled away from the door just in time. He hid himself in an empty classroom across from the one that Professor Quirrell was in. When he heard Professor Quirrell's footsteps fade into the distance, he left the room and followed behind, muffling his footsteps with a simple spell that he had taught himself months ago.

Oh, how he wished he had just a few minutes to be able to contact one of the teachers! He wasn't sure that he should be following Professor Quirrell. It wasn't his business, after all. But, he couldn't just let him get away with stealing something, could he? Unsure, Harry decided that he would just continue to follow Professor Quirell, to see where he went. Hopefully, he would be able to tell where the man was going and then Harry could leave and tell one of the adults what was going on.

So, stealthily tracking the older man, Harry followed as he was led up to the third floor corridor. Harry wondered where the other person Professor Quirrell had been speaking to had gone. From time to time, when Harry had caught glimpses of his prey, he had only seen the professor, usually with the ends of his robes just clearing the corner of the next turn. Perhaps, the other person was in front of Professor Quirrell, leading the way?

Harry pressed his back against a cold, stone wall and strove to listen around the corner of the doorjamb. He heard Professor Quirrell in the next room whispering, "Alohamora," and the click of a door swinging open. For a brief moment, Harry heard a chilling growl fill the air. However, incredibly, Harry heard music start to play and, almost immediately, the growls ceased.

After a few minutes of no sound, other than the soft music playing, Harry peered cautiously around the corner of the door. A door at the far side of the room stood open, but Harry couldn't see anyone. Hesitantly, he softly approached the room, and peered inside. A huge, three-headed dog was sleeping peacefully, its enormous body covering almost the entirety of the room.

Harry's jaw dropped. For awhile, the only thing he could focus upon was the dog in front of him. The three heads were amazing, true, but the sheer size of the dog was what took his breath away! Wow! This

must be the Fluffy that Hagrid had mentioned. Thank Merlin it was sleeping. Harry did not think he would enjoy meeting such a huge dog if it was awake.

The music suddenly stopped playing and Fluffy started to shift in its sleep. Harry took a nervous step backwards. As he did so, he finally noticed the open trap door next to one of Fluffy's paws. It had obviously been pulled open by Professor Quirrell, and the older man must have gone through that door.

Taking a deep breath, Harry hurried forward to look through the opening. He was aware that Fluffy was starting to shuffle more energetically and he had no intention of being in the room when the dog woke up. However, Harry couldn't see anything when he peered through the opening. It was completely dark.

Harry was about to take a step backward and see if he could find Professor Snape or Professor McGonagall, when he realized that Fluffy was staring at him. It was a heart-stopping moment. The dog opened its mouth and Harry saw teeth the size of his arm. Not even stopping to draw breath, Harry jumped through the open trap door. At that moment, it seemed wiser to jump into the unknown than to stay behind with Fluffy.

Harry felt like he had landed on a squishy mattress. He whispered, "Lumos," and his wand tip ignited, casting a soft glow around the chamber. He looked around quickly, but he was alone. Professor Quirrell, if he had been here, had obviously not stayed long. Harry felt a movement under his leg and looked down to see what looked like an octopus tentacle circling his leg. He automatically pulled his leg away and the tentacle grabbed tighter.

Gasping, Harry sat up and realized he had landed in Devil's Snare. Oh no! He had to escape or he would be suffocated by it. It was just like a boa constrictor. For a moment of blind panic, Harry just tugged uselessly at his trapped leg. When a second tentacle appeared and wove around the leg, binding it tighter, he forced himself to stop and calm down.

“Okay. Okay. What is the way to fight Devil’s Snare?” he asked himself. Almost immediately, Harry had a vision of the page of his herbology book in which Devil’s Snare was addressed. He recalled the illustration on the page in which a wizard held a wand from which a large blast of light issued. Of course! Devil’s Snare didn’t like light.

Harry tightened his grip on his wand and, raising it high, said, “Lumos maximus!” Light flooded the chamber and the Devil’s Snare retreated into the corners of the room. Harry felt the soft bedding on which he lay shifting. A hole opened up, and Harry felt himself falling. Luckily, he fell only a few feet further because, this time, he fell on a hard floor.

Clambering to his feet, Harry winced at a new collection of bruises. He glanced above him. Through the hole in the Devil’s Snare, he could just see Fluffy’s eye peering through the trap door. Well, he wasn’t going to be able to go back up that way. He might as well continue on and see if there was another exit. Quietly, and with the light from his wand set on low, Harry tiptoed down a dark hallway, peering into the darkness for another glimpse of Professor Quirrell.

He came to a door behind which he heard an odd whirring noise. Harry slowly opened the door, ready to slam it shut again immediately. However, it seemed just to be a room with some odd birds and, Quirrell again, was nowhere to be seen. Harry edged into the room and realized that the odd birds were really flying keys. He saw one key that looked a little the worse for wear and realized that this was the key to a closed door at the other end of the room. Quirrell must have captured the key and used it to pass through the door already.

Harry pointed his wand at the key and uttered a simple summoning charm that he had mastered months ago, “Accio key.” No response. Oh well, that would have been too simple. Seeing a broom in the corner, he summoned that instead. Mounting it, he pursued the fleeing key. It was difficult to keep an eye on the key he wanted among all of the other keys flying around. But, in a fairly short time, he was able to close his hand around the fluttering metal. He landed easily and fit the key in the lock. The door opened and Harry tentatively peered into the next room.

A giant chess set, taking up the entire room, greeted him. When the statues came to life and barred his passage, scaring years off his life, as he afterwards described it, Harry realized that he had to play his way across the board. Harry knew a fair amount of chess strategy from having watched Ron play his favorite game. He elected to take the queen's position, since that was the most powerful piece on the board. Harry sincerely hoped that this match wouldn't be too difficult because he didn't have Ron's flair for the game. He refused to allow himself to wonder what would happen if he lost the game. Playing cautiously, Harry slowly advanced upon the opponent's king. When, eventually, he was able to corner the king, he couldn't help his triumphant yell of, "Checkmate!" The statue king let his sword fall to the ground, and Harry strode past, through a hallway that he had glimpsed tantalizingly throughout the game.

In the hallway, he edged nervously past an unconscious troll, which had obviously been incapacitated by Professor Quirrell. The stink was dreadful! Harry was grateful that he didn't have to deal with the creature.

On past the troll and through another doorway. There, he found a table with various flasks filled with unknown potions. He jumped when flames sprang up unexpectedly, surrounding the room, so that he was trapped inside. Harry scanned the room, trying to see if there was any opening, but there was not. Realizing that the flasks held the answer to his next step, Harry moved closer to the table holding the bottles. There, he found a riddle which provided clues as to the contents of the different bottles. If he understood the riddle correctly, he could poison himself if he chose the wrong bottle. Not for the first time since this adventure began, Harry silently chastised himself for having followed Quirrell. What the hell had he been thinking?

Harry read over the riddle a few times until he was confident that he was making the right choice. Then, taking a deep breath, he selected one of the bottles and took a deep gulp. As soon as he had swallowed the potion, he felt a chill in his blood. Hoping that this meant that it was working correctly, Harry stepped through the flames that were circling the room. He opened yet another door, and, this time, found himself in a big chamber. Professor Quirrell was waiting.

When Harry saw the Professor, he hesitated. Although his back was to Harry, Professor Quirrell was apparently aware that the boy was there. Because, without turning, he said, "Mr. Twist. I thought someone may have been following me but I was not expecting a student. Why are you here?"

The Professor was continuing to stare into a large mirror as he spoke with Harry. Harry wasn't sure whether he should be nervous or not. The Professor's tone of voice was not threatening. On the other hand, he was no longer stammering. Did that mean that the older man no longer saw the need to hide his real purposes? And, if so, what did that mean for Harry?

"I...I saw you going up the third floor corridor," said Harry. "I know it's off limits and I was curious." He didn't say anything about having heard Quirrell discussing the Philosopher's Stone.

Silence greeted his explanation. It was clear that Professor Quirrell was not really paying attention to him. Rather, he appeared to be engrossed with peering intently into the large mirror in front of him.

"Use the boy!" Harry heard a strange voice. He looked around the room but didn't see anyone else present. Who had spoken?

"But, My Lord," Professor Quirrell was saying. "How? I don't understand how this mirror works. I thought it showed what the heart desires and I desire to have the stone for you, My Lord. But, where is the stone? Inside the mirror? Should I break it?"

"Have the boy look inside the mirror," directed the disembodied voice.

Again, Harry looked around the otherwise empty room. "Who's talking?" he asked Professor Quirrell.

Professor Quirrell ignored his question and, turning to face Harry, demanded, "Come here, Twist. I want you to look into the mirror and tell me what you see!"

Slowly, Harry approached the mirror. He wasn't sure what he was supposed to see. However, Professor Quirrell said that the mirror

showed the heart's desire. Well, at this moment, he wanted to find the Philosopher's Stone (whatever that was) and keep it safe. If he could find it first, maybe he could hide it from the Professor.

Not sure what to expect, Harry looked into the mirror. At first, it was blurry but then he saw himself, with Professor Quirrell standing next to him. He almost jumped out of his skin when he saw his mirror self stop acting as a reflection, moving instead as a separate person. Mirror-Harry held up a small stone, blood red and about the size of his fist, and put it in his pocket. Immediately, real-Harry felt a heavy weight in his pocket. His eyes flew wide and he started in surprise. He hoped that Professor Quirrell didn't notice.

"What did you see?" demanded Quirrell.

Harry lied, "I saw myself getting all O's on my OWL exams. And, Professor Dumbledore shaking my hand."

"He lies...he lies..." came the disembodied voice again. "Let me speak to him...face to face..."

"Master, you are not strong enough!" warned Quirrell.

"I have strength enough...for this..."

Professor Quirrell unwrapped the turban surrounding his head and revealed an unbelievable sight. A face unlike any Harry had ever seen before was sticking out of the back of Professor Quirrell's head. Harry wondered vaguely whether he was dreaming or if the potion he had swallowed to get past the fire in the previous room was causing him to hallucinate.

A cold, high voice issued out of the ghostlike face, its eyes gleaming red, and its nose flattened, with slits for nostrils. "See what I have become, boy? The great Lord Voldemort reduced to living off the body of another. But, with the Philosopher's Stone, I can create my own body and rise again. If you help me, I will reward you. Give me the Stone that's in your pocket!"

Harry felt his brain freeze. It was hard to think. He was confronting Lord Voldemort. The crazy lunatic who had killed his parents and tried to kill him. The psycho who his aunt said Dumbledore warned might rise again and who would then try to kill Harry once more. And, this dangerous madman knew that Harry had the Philosopher's Stone in his pocket and was demanding that Harry give it to him. What should he do?!

Well, one thing was for sure. There was no way he was giving that Stone over voluntarily. Voldemort had said that he could create a new body and rise again if he had the Philosopher's Stone. No way was he, Harry, going to help Voldemort rise again.

He turned to run, but he heard Voldemort yell to Quirrell, "Seize him!" He felt Quirrell's hand on his wrist but, then, he was released unexpectedly.

Quirrell looked at his burned and blistered hand, cradling it with his other hand. Quirrell was looking confused, and his eyes were glazed with pain. But, at Voldemort's cry, "Seize him! Seize him!" Quirrell tried to hold Harry again.

Harry's scar burst into fire and he felt his eyes water with pain. He blindly reached to push Quirrell away and heard the older man cry out in pain again. Instinctively, Harry pursued, and closed his hands on Quirrell's face. For some unknown reason, Quirrell could not stand Harry's touch. Pressing this strange advantage, Harry kept his hands on Quirrell's face, despite the terrible pain in his own head.

From far away, as he slipped into unconsciousness, he thought he heard someone calling, "Mark! Mark Twist!"

Harry woke in the hospital wing, with a pounding headache. Groaning, he opened his eyes slowly, filtering out the harsh light. Through his veiled eyes, he saw his glasses on the bedstand, and pulled them on. He smiled slightly when he saw a box of chocolate frog cards and a big get well note signed by a few of his friends, including his roommates and Hermione.

He heard a soft noise and turned to see Professor Dumbledore enter the room. He was smiling at Harry and said, "Hello, Mark. How are you feeling?"

"Okay, sir." Harry blinked. "Uh...what happened?"

Professor Dumbledore laughed. "Well, you might tell me! I found you in the dungeons with Professor Quirrell, stopping him from stealing the Philosopher's Stone for Lord Voldemort."

When Harry didn't react, Dumbledore continued, understanding that at least some of this information was not new to the boy. "Professor Quirrell is dead, and Lord Voldemort has fled."

Harry's mouth dropped open in dismay. "Dead? I killed him?"

Dumbledore looked very serious. "Actually, Mark, I would say that Lord Voldemort killed him. Something about his possession by Lord Voldemort obviously destroyed the man. There is no other explanation. And, without a body to possess, Lord Voldemort has disappeared again."

"But, will Lord ... Voldemort," Harry hesitated over the name, but Dumbledore nodded his encouragement, "will he try to return?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. But, if everyone is as brave as you, and tries to stop him, he may never be able to return."

Harry blushed and let the praise sink in. It was a novel feeling. Someone looking at him with admiration and telling him that he was brave. It was...wonderful.

"What about the Philosopher's Stone, sir? Where is that now?"

"I have returned it to its rightful owner, Nicolas Flamel. Nicolas has agreed that it is too dangerous to keep and he will destroy it as soon as he and his wife put their affairs in order. The elixir made from the stone, you see, was keeping them alive."

Harry was unsure what to say to this. Dumbledore seemed to understand what Harry was thinking and said, "To the well-organized mind, Mark, death is but the next great adventure."

"Yes, sir," Harry murmured, politely, although he didn't really understand. He asked a question that had been troubling him. "How did I get the stone, though, sir? After all, Professor Quirrell looked in the mirror and he wanted it too. Why did it appear in my pocket?"

Professor Dumbledore smiled widely. "Only the person who wanted to find the Stone and not use would be able to get it. This was one of my more brilliant ideas and, between you and me, that's saying something!"

Harry found himself smiling back. Maybe Dumbledore wasn't so bad, after all.

Harry enjoyed the attention over the next few days. Everyone wanted to know what had happened down in the dungeons. Although a few people scoffed at him, and called him a liar, most of his fellow Gryffindors hung on his every word and were properly impressed. Harry enjoyed seeing the looks of admiration and receiving the pats of congratulations bestowed on him as he walked by. He had been right! Hogwarts was the place for him! And, his mother had been right, too. He was born to be a hero!

He walked along in a bubble of happiness that not even the approaching summer holiday or Draco Malfoy's glares of dislike could dim. On the last day of term, at the end-of-year feast, Dumbledore even made an announcement congratulating Harry's daring and awarding him 50 points for bravery. Gryffindor still lost the house cup to Slytherin, but they came in a close second. It was a wonderful moment!

The next day, Harry packed his bags and joined the other students lining up to board the Hogwarts Express taking them back to London. He planned on trying to get his old job back for the summer. He expected that it wouldn't be too difficult. Restaurants usually needed more staff during summer holidays. First, he would see if he could stay at the boarding house he had lived in last year. Again, he

expected that it would be easy to pay for a room there. Harry wasn't looking forward to the summer, but he figured it shouldn't be too miserable. It would probably pass quickly and, best of all, Ron had asked him whether he was interested in spending a few days at his home during the summer. Harry couldn't wait!

AN – I know that this chapter was very close to canon, so I'm publishing the next chapter now too (because I am just so nice). Some events in this story will change only slightly due to Harry's being an unknown muggleborn while other events (to come) will change a lot. Please hang on. There are surprises in store as the story progresses. Again, thanks for reviewing!!!

Chapter Seven – Year Two Begins; The Parselmouth

The summer dragged by slowly for Harry. As he suspected, he was welcomed back to both his busboy job at the restaurant as well as to his room at the boarding house. It was strange being an 18 year old now, as Harry had to age himself as soon as he left Kings Cross station.

Every few days, Harry would find a private place to turn back into his almost 12 year old self. However, no letters arrived for Mark Twist. Harry spent the majority of his free time reading his textbooks, but he was incredibly lonely. He marked September 1st on his calendar and, every morning, checked off another box in his countdown to the date that would see him back at Hogwarts.

Harry's birthday came and went without any acknowledgement. No one knew that he turned 12 on July 31st. Harry had told his friends that his birthday was August 5, so that no one would wonder why Mark Twist had the same birthday as the still-missing Harry Potter.

On his fake birthday, Harry woke up feeling excited. He was sure that Ron and Hermione, at least, would send him a birthday card. Finding a private spot in a nearby park, Harry shrank from an 18 year old to a 12 year old. He waited impatiently and, sure enough, after about ½ hour, he saw an owl in the distance.

The young boy jumped up and down in excitement and waved his arms at the owl, signaling where he was. When it approached, the owl told Harry what he thought of such an undignified display, giving Harry a disgusted hoot. But, Harry ignored the owl, and impatiently untied the letter strapped to its leg. It was from Hermione! The simple birthday card made Harry's heart soar. He was so focused on re-reading the card, he didn't notice that two other owls had arrived until they started pecking impatiently at his arm.

Startled, Harry looked up from the card, and saw Ron's family owl, Errol, and another unfamiliar owl. Opening the card from the owl he didn't recognize first, Harry smiled at seeing Hagrid's signature. The card wished him a happy birthday and told him to make sure that he

visited the first weekend he returned to Hogwarts. Silently promising that he would do so, Harry turned to open the card held by Errol.

Hi, Mark. Hope you're having a great birthday! Are you still up for a visit? If your parents say okay, how about you spend the last week of August with me? We're going to Diagon Alley for our school books the Monday before school starts. Why not meet me there and you can return back to my house with my family and me? We can take you to the train on September 1.

Let me know. Happy birthday. – Ron

Harry smiled so widely, his jaw hurt. Hoping that he would need to respond to a letter, Harry had come prepared; he scribbled a note back to Ron using the quill and parchment he had hidden in his pocket.

That's great! Can't wait! My parents say okay. I'll see you in Diagon Alley. I'll be at Flourish and Blotts at noon. See you! – Mark

Watching the owl wing on its way with his return message, Harry thought gratefully of Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. Even though they had so many children of their own, and obviously didn't have a lot of money to spare, they were still willing to allow Ron's school friend to come for a visit. They had no way of knowing how much such a visit meant to him. Harry promised that he would be the ideal guest, helping with household chores, and being as polite as possible, so that they would allow him to visit often.

The week before school term started saw Harry at Flourish and Blotts, looking for the Weasley family. He had left his trunk at the Leaky Cauldron, where the innkeeper, Tom, had allowed him to store it for the day. Harry had spent a few hours visiting some other stores in Diagon Alley and replenishing his school supplies. The only task he still had to finish was to purchase his second year school books.

Harry saw the Weasley clan in the corner of the store, looking over their various book lists. As Harry approached the group, he noticed that Ron's younger sister, Ginny, was also holding a book list. Harry suddenly recalled that this was Ginny's first year at Hogwarts.

“Hello, everyone,” Harry called shyly. The Weasleys chorused a greeting and Ron hurried to Harry’s side, and thumped him hard in the back in greeting. Ginny turned a little red and whispered a shy “hi” back.

The group was distracted by a commotion at the back of the store, where a table was laid out. A store employee made an announcement that the book signing by Gilderoy Lockhart was about to begin. Harry recognized the name of the author of a number of the books on the assigned second year reading list.

Mrs. Weasley became a little flustered as she jockeyed for position on line to get her books signed. Ron muttered to Harry that Mrs. Weasley fancied Lockhart. Mrs. Weasley pretended not to hear him. Harry hid a smile.

As Mrs. Weasley waited for the line to move, and to have Lockhart sign their books, Harry and Ron stood off to the side and exchanged stories about their summer. Ginny stood silently next to Ron. When Harry asked Ginny whether she was looking forward to starting Hogwarts, she nodded her head, but didn’t say anything. Ron rolled his eyes. “She’s been talking about nothing else all summer. Don’t know why she’s so silent now,” he said. Ginny blushed but didn’t speak.

From behind him, Harry heard the hated drawl of Draco Malfoy. “Well, look what the cat dragged in. Weasel and his sidekick, Twisted.”

Ron’s eyes narrowed and he turned bright red. “Bugger off, Malfoy.”

“Language, language, Weasel,” Draco drawled. “You should watch your mouth in front of your sister, even if she is a blood traitor like the rest of your family.”

Before Ron or Ginny could flare up, an aristocratic, blond haired man interrupted. It was clear from the resemblance that this was Draco’s father. “Now, now, Draco,” he said, indulgently. “Play nice. Ms. Weasley cannot help who her family is.”

In the shocked silence that followed Mr. Malfoy's rudeness, Mr. Malfoy reached into Ginny's cauldron where a few battered textbooks lay. "I see that your father cannot even purchase you new books. What a shame."

Harry couldn't stay silent any longer. "I think that Ginny is very lucky. While it is nice to have money, it is far more important for parents to be loving and kind. Not everyone is lucky enough to have such wonderful parents," and he cast a meaningful look at Draco.

The not-so-subtle implication that the Weasleys were more desirable parents than he was did not sit well with Mr. Malfoy. He turned a cold look at Harry and said, "And you are?"

Harry responded reluctantly. "Mark Twist."

"Oh, yes," drawled the cold voice. "I've heard of you. Muggleborn." He made the word sound as rude as "mudblood."

Turning away as if he did not want to be contaminated, Mr. Malfoy called to his son. "Come, Draco. Let us go to Borgin & Burkes. The clientele there will be refreshing."

Harry clenched his hands into fists and seethed. He knew that Ron and Ginny were equally angry, but they all held their tongues as Mrs. Weasley approached, bubbling from having met Mr. Lockhart and with the news that Lockhart was going to be the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts for the coming year.

Seeing how happy she was, Harry was glad that neither she nor Mr. Weasley had overheard the exchange with the Malfoys.

"Thanks," Ginny murmured to Harry as they moved to leave the store.

"Yeah," said Ron.

"It was nothing," Harry said. "I meant it." He was warmed by the glow of their approving smiles.

“Let’s forget that prat,” said Ron. “We are going to have an awesome last week of summer.”

True to his prediction, the children had a wonderful end of summer. Harry could not remember ever being happier. He was surrounded by people who enjoyed his company and were kind to each other. He was living with a real family and enjoyed every dull routine or common moment that they permitted him to share.

Best of all, he played a down-and-dirty form of Quidditch with Ron, Ginny, George and Fred. Harry reveled in the freedom of flying. Ron and the twins begged him to reconsider joining the Gryffindor Quidditch team this year, but Harry held firm to his decision to concentrate on studies. Fred and George kept badgering Harry so much that Mrs. Weasley finally had to intervene and tell the boys to leave their guest alone.

Harry was sorry when September 1st arrived. He would have loved to have stayed with the Weasleys forever. Harry thanked Mr. and Mrs. Weasley for inviting him and, feeling greatly daring, even hinted that he would love to return the following summer.

Second year started calmly enough. Harry continued his studious habits and enjoyed the routine of classes. Unfortunately, Defense Against the Dark Arts was a bit of a joke. The new teacher, Gilderoy Lockhart, was so full of himself. Harry was sure he was lying about all of the dark creatures he said he had captured or killed. The man was obviously incompetent. Harry was annoyed that it seemed as if this class would be a waste of time this year.

Harry noticed that Ginny didn’t seem to be enjoying her first year very much. He hoped that she wasn’t finding the class work too hard. She seemed stressed. He had gotten to know her a bit during the week he had spent at the Weasleys. She had become less shy and, at Hogwarts, always had a smile and a few words for him. Harry resolved that, if she continued to seem so unhappy in a few weeks, he would speak with her brothers about her.

One day, the school was thrown into turmoil by an attack on the caretaker’s cat, Mrs. Norris. Mr. Filch, the caretaker, was beside

himself. However, Professor Dumbledore assured him that the cat was not dead, just petrified. The real worry was that no one knew who or what had petrified the cat. A message had been written in blood on the wall behind the petrified, hanging cat: "The Chamber Of Secrets Has Been Opened. Enemies Of The Heir, Beware".

Hermione had bravely asked Professor Binns, their History of Magic ghost teacher, about the legend of the Chamber of Secrets. After some convincing, Professor Binns had explained that one of the founders, Salazar Slytherin, had reputedly created a hidden chamber within Hogwarts where he had hidden a monster that would purge the school of muggleborns. After hearing that story, Harry, along with the rest of the school, could talk of little else. What a nutter this Slytherin was! Thank Merlin he hadn't been sorted into Slytherin house!

As a result of the attack, Professor Lockhart had suggested a dueling club. While Harry had little faith that Lockhart would be able to teach the students anything, he had never seen a wizard's duel and was curious to see how it worked. So, he found himself in the Great Hall along with most of the school, watching Professors Lockhart and Snape demonstrate a wizard's duel. Harry hid a smile when Professor Snape shouted "Expelliarmus" and disarmed Lockhart so easily. Harry might not think Snape was very nice, but there was no denying that he was a brilliant wizard. Lockhart, on the other hand, was a git.

Not wanting to look like a fool again, Lockhart suggested that they use students for the next demonstration. Snape immediately suggested his favorite student, Draco. Lockhart's eyes fell on Ron and he called him to the stage.

Harry jostled to the front of the crowd to watch his friend. He was worried that Draco might try something underhanded. He knew Draco well enough to know that he didn't fight fair. Harry tightened his hand on his wand, ready to come to Ron's aid if need be. At first, Draco and Ron just skirmished. They each threw jinxes at each other, causing the other to fall back or trip. However, after Ron hit Draco with a particularly well-placed jelly-legs jinx, Draco became enraged and yelled, "Serpensortia."

A huge snake flew from the end of Draco's wand. The crowd around Harry gasped and drew back from the stage. Ron turned pale and fell back a few steps as well. The snake slithered toward him and raised its head, preparing to strike. Without stopping to think, Harry yelled, "Stop! Get away from him!"

The snake immediately stopped its advance on Ron. It turned its head toward Harry, as if it understood what the boy had said. Slowly, the snake slithered toward Harry instead. Strangely, Harry felt no fear. It was as if there was a connection between the snake and him. He just knew (in a way he couldn't explain) that the snake meant him no harm. It hissed, as it approached, "I will not hurt the man-child. I will do as you ask, Speaker of the Most Noble of Tongues."

"Thank you. I...appreciate it. He is my friend." The snake stopped in front of Harry. Slowly, the young boy reached out his hand to the snake. However, before he could touch it, he heard a murmur in the distance and the snake vanished. Harry looked up to see Professor Snape lowering his wand, and staring at Harry with surprise and calculation.

Harry's eyes turned to Ron, to make sure that he was okay. Harry was taken aback by the almost scared look Ron was giving him. What was the matter? Ron jumped off the stage and grabbed Harry's arm, pulling him from the room. As they left, Harry noticed that the other students were silent, and staring at him strangely. As he moved past them, they all drew back from him in fear. What was going on?

Ron pulled Harry into the empty Gryffindor common room. Hermione had followed them and the door shut behind her. Before Harry could speak, Ron yelled, "How come you didn't mention you can speak parseltongue?"

Harry was surprised at Ron's attacking tone. "You mean being able to speak to the snake?" At Ron's nod, he continued, "I didn't know until just now. What's the big deal? Aren't you glad I could tell the snake to leave you alone?"

“Of course, I’m glad about that! But, you don’t realize...speaking parseltongue is the mark of a dark wizard. Salazar Slytherin could speak to snakes.”

Harry was dumbfounded. “S..s..surely,” he stuttered, “I’m not the only one here who can speak to snakes? There must be other wizards who can do it, too?”

Hermione spoke up at this. “No, Mark. Being a parselmouth is a very uncommon talent. Ron’s right. It was what Slytherin was known for.” Her pale face convinced Harry more than Ron’s words just how serious this was. Hermione, as a muggleborn, didn’t have the same wizarding prejudices as Ron had grown up believing. If she, too, was concerned that Harry could speak parseltongue, this was, indeed, a “big deal”.

Harry looked from Ron to Hermione. “I’m not a dark wizard. I’m not!”

“We know that, mate!” agreed Ron. “But, the whole school’s going to think you’re Slytherin’s heir.”

“I’m not!”

“Salazar Slytherin lived a thousand years ago. For all we know, you could be,” said Hermione.

“But, he’s muggleborn, Hermione,” protested Ron. “He can’t be Slytherin’s heir.”

Harry was grateful for Ron’s support but his heart sank at the thought that Ron was mistaken. Harry was not muggleborn. Could he really be a descendant of Salazar Slytherin? He didn’t want to believe it could be true. But, if it was, so what? he told himself defiantly. Aunt Petunia was his aunt, for Merlin’s sake, but that didn’t mean he was a git like Dudley. No one could choose their relatives. Even if Slytherin was his ancestor, it didn’t matter. He, Harry, was a Gryffindor. He was meant to be a hero. His mother had believed it to be true. Someday, everyone would cheer when they saw him. He would be admired by everyone. Just like when he had defeated Voldemort at the end of first year. It was his destiny.

Hermione responded, “Ron, you know that muggleborns could have a wizard or witch in their family tree way back, unknown to them...I’m not saying that Mark is Slytherin’s heir,” she protested hastily, at Ron’s angry look. “I’m just saying what other students will say. Mark needs to be prepared.”

Harry raised his chin and unconsciously stood taller. “Let them say what they will. Whether I am Slytherin’s heir or not, I did not harm Filch’s cat and I did not open the Chamber of Secrets. I am not a dark wizard.”

Ron and Hermione nodded supportively. Behind their friend’s back, however, they exchanged glances. They knew what the other was thinking. When Mark stood so straight and spoke so calmly, he was like a little prince. It was easy to believe, watching him stand so regally, that he was indeed the heir of one of the founders.

AN – Hope you liked it!

Chapter Eight – Year Two; The Chamber of Secrets

During the next few weeks, Harry was aware that conversations stopped when he walked by. Stares followed him down the hall and students avoided being alone with him. He knew that rumors were flying about Hogwarts and that, as Hermione predicted, many suspected that he was the heir of Slytherin. He felt Dumbledore's eyes watching him from the staff table at meal times, although he was never able to catch him. Every time Harry looked up, Dumbledore was looking elsewhere. However, Harry couldn't shake the feeling that the headmaster had been staring at him only moments before.

Harry was grateful that Ron and Hermione were vocal in their support. He couldn't imagine how he would have coped without them. He also felt a wave of gratitude toward Fred, George and Ginny. They all made a point of talking to him, and sitting with him at mealtimes. Harry didn't know if Percy, Ron's eldest brother, actually believed that the younger boy was Slytherin's heir but Percy had obviously believed it to be politic to stay away from Harry. Percy always made sure that he sat at the furthest end of the table from wherever Harry was sitting.

Because Ginny sometimes sat next to him at mealtimes, Harry noticed that she was continuing to look very pale and stressed. He asked her whether she needed any help with her studies, but she said she was doing fine in her classes. Harry was concerned about her health and watched her closely. As a result, he noticed when she seemed particularly distraught one day and he followed her from the lunchroom, meaning to speak with her again. Perhaps he could convince her to see Madam Pomfrey, the school nurse. A pepper-up potion might do Ginny some good.

Harry saw Ginny dart into a girl's bathroom and decided to wait until she came out. However, she came out running and Harry was distracted from following her by the wails coming from the bathroom. Feeling a bit foolish, Harry pushed open the door of the girl's bathroom and the wails became louder. "Who's there?" Harry called. "Are you all right? Can I help?"

The wails subsided to muffled sobs. "What are you doing here? You're a boy," came a voice from inside one of the stalls.

"I'm sorry," Harry said, daring to come a bit closer. "I heard crying and I thought I could help. Please, is there anything I can do?"

Harry noticed that the stall from which the voice was issuing was overflowing. Water was sloshing on the floor and soon would reach the door. "Is the toilet overflowing? Is that why you're upset?"

"Yes, I'm upset!" yelled the voice. A girl's ghostly body passed through the closed stall door. Harry stepped back in shock and almost tripped and fell.

"Do you know why the toilet's overflowing?! Do you?!"

Harry shook his head in silence. "Because that girl threw a book at me! Do you think it's funny to throw things at me? Let's all throw books at Myrtle, because she can't feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach! Fifty points if it goes through her head! Well, ha ha ha! What a lovely game, I don't think!"

Harry made some soothing sounds. "I'm sorry...Myrtle, is it?" At the ghost's morose nod, he continued. "I'm sure the girl didn't mean to upset you. Can I help you clean up?"

Myrtle sniffed and looked at Harry suspiciously. When she was convinced that he was sincere, she admitted, "You don't need to clean up. The thing got washed out; it's over there."

Harry found a small black book under the sink, where Myrtle was pointing. It was a diary and, on the first page, was written "T.M. Riddle". He rifled through the pages, but the book was blank. "Do you mind if I take this, Myrtle?"

Myrtle stopped sniffing and looked at Harry more closely. She gave him a half-smile. "You can take it. You're a nice boy. What's your name?"

"Mark Twist."

“You can come visit me again, if you want.”

“Thank you, Myrtle. I appreciate the invitation.”

Harry tried a number of revealing spells on the diary, in case it was written in invisible ink or had some charm placed on it to conceal its contents, but nothing seemed to work. Finally, he decided he might as well use it himself for schoolwork. However, when he put pen to paper, the ink was soaked up into the page and disappeared. Excited, Harry hoped he had discovered the secret of how the diary worked. He wrote, “My name is Mark Twist” and watched the ink sink into the diary and vanish.

A few heartbeats later, written in his own ink, the diary answered back. “Hello, Mark Twist. My name is Tom Riddle. How did you come by my diary?”

“Someone tried to flush it down a toilet,” Harry wrote back.

“People are always trying to hide the truth. Come let me show you the memories this diary holds. I know the truth of the Chamber of Secrets. It was opened in my fifth year and the monster within attacked several students, killing one. I caught the person who’d opened the Chamber and he was expelled. The monster lived on, and the one who had the power to release it was not imprisoned. I can take you inside my memory of the night I caught the person who opened the Chamber last time. Let me show you.”

Harry hesitated and then wrote, “OK.”

The diary began to glow and the papers rustled as if blown by wind. Harry felt as if he were pulled inside the book and he watched as a sixteen-year old Tom Riddle showed him the night, fifty years ago, when Tom had caught Hagrid concealing a monster in a cupboard. Harry watched, appalled but unable to change the past, as Hagrid defended the monster he had hidden, claiming that it had not killed anyone. The enormous spider ran out the door as Tom Riddle tried to stop it, and Hagrid threw himself on Tom to prevent him from hurting

the monster. Harry found himself being thrust from the diary, as the memory came to a close.

Harry pushed his chair back from the table on which the diary lay. He watched the book with narrowed eyes, panting a little. Hagrid had opened the Chamber of Secrets in the past! No! He didn't believe it! Tom Riddle was mistaken.

Harry didn't tell anyone of the diary he had found, not even Ron or Hermione. He didn't want to tell them the story of Hagrid's monster. He didn't want them to look at Hagrid with suspicion. If Hagrid had opened the Chamber in the past, it was a mistake. He wouldn't do it again! Certainly, Hagrid wouldn't try to purge the school of muggleborns.

The weeks went by and the school quieted again. People started to treat Harry more normally as it seemed that the Chamber of Secrets was staying closed. Then, Harry came back to his room one day to find that his things had been tossed around as if someone had been searching through his possessions. Looking quickly through his things, Harry realized that the diary was missing. A fellow Gryffindor had stolen the diary. No one else could have entered the Gryffindor dormitory. Ginny!

But, how had she known he had the book? Grimly, Harry recalled that he had been carrying the book when his bag had spilled in the hallway the other day. Anyone seeing him then could have noticed that he had the diary. Was Ginny in the hall that day? Harry didn't remember, but she might have been. Why had she stolen the diary? To keep him from learning Hagrid's secret, of course. That's why she must have been so upset these last few months, he realized. She was worried that people would blame Hagrid for opening the Chamber of Secrets again. Should he tell her that the secret was safe with him? No. He would say nothing for now. He would only embarrass her if she knew that he was aware that she had stolen the diary from his room. He would just keep an eye on her and see what happened.

Harry's worry about Ginny was driven from his mind by a new worry. Only a few days after the diary was stolen from his room, Harry was

walking through the hall with Hermione, on his way back from a late night of studying at the library, when he heard a chilling voice, seeming to come from the walls themselves. "Kill. Rip. Tear."

He froze in his tracks, and Hermione asked him, worriedly, "What's the matter?"

"Don't you hear that?" he asked sharply.

"What?" She looked around.

The chilling voice came again. "Kill. Hungry."

"You can't hear that?!" Harry demanded, taking out his wand

"I don't hear anything, Mark," Hermione answered, sounding very worried. She drew out her wand too. "What do you hear?"

"I hear someone saying 'Kill. Hungry.' Someone wants to kill."

"What?! Do you recognize the voice? Where's it coming from?" Hermione asked. She raised her wand higher.

"I've never heard that voice before. I'm sure of it. I think it's coming from the walls," said Harry. He stared hard at the walls as if he could see through them if he tried hard enough. Taking a deep breath, he took a step backwards. "We're closest to Gryffindor Tower. Let's find Professor McGonagall and tell her that something very dangerous is going on."

With their wands in front of them, clutched tightly, the two made their way to Professor McGonagall's quarters. Harry knocked on the door and was relieved when Professor McGonagall answered quickly. It was still early enough in the evening that she was not yet in her dressing gown. She was worried to see two students standing at her door and asked quickly, "Twist. Granger. What's the matter?"

Harry knew that his story would sound odd, but he knew what he had heard. This was too dangerous not to tell an adult. He could only hope that she would know what to do. "Professor. Hermione and I

were walking back from the library when I heard a voice, coming as if from the walls, saying 'Kill. Rip. Tear. Hungry.' We didn't see anyone and I don't know where the voice went, but it sounded really serious. I'm afraid someone is going to try to kill somebody. We have to do something!"

During his recounting of the events, Professor McGonagall had turned white, and her hand had lifted to press against her throat in alarm. "Oh, Merlin! What can this be? We need to see the Headmaster right away. Come quickly!"

And, wasting no time, she set off towards Dumbledore's office, with Harry and Hermione following. In a short time, Harry found himself telling the story again to the headmaster. He tried not to fidget under Professor Dumbledore's piercing gaze. There was silence for a moment, after Harry finished speaking. Troubled by Dumbledore's failure to take action, Harry urged, "Please, sir. I'm not lying! I really heard a voice saying that it wanted to kill! Please, we must do something!"

"A voice you heard coming from the walls?" repeated Dumbledore.

Knowing that this sounded ridiculous, Harry nodded miserably.

"And you, Miss Granger. You've been very silent. Did you think that the voice was coming from the walls, too?"

Hermione cast an apologetic look at Harry. "I...I didn't hear any voice, sir."

Professor McGonagall, who was standing behind them, uttered a shocked, "What?" Dumbledore, however, just sat up straighter in his chair and his eyes seemed to pierce Harry's even more sharply.

"You were standing right next to Mr. Twist, and yet you didn't hear any voice?"

"Yes," Hermione admitted.

"I have heard, Mr. Twist, that you speak parseltongue," said Professor Dumbledore.

Harry stiffened. Was this an accusation that he was a dark wizard? Didn't they understand that someone was going to try to kill somebody? Did they think that, because he was a parselmouth, he would lie about such a thing?

"Yes, sir," said Harry, tightly, holding on to his temper.

"Is there any chance, Mr. Twist, that the voice you heard was that of a snake?"

Harry froze. Now that he cast his memory back to the voice he had heard, it was completely possible that Dumbledore was right. "Yes, sir," Harry said excitedly. "I can't be sure, of course. But, maybe! That would explain why I could hear the voice but Hermione couldn't." Harry felt a wave of relief. He hadn't had time to dwell on the fear, but a small voice in his head had wondered whether he was going crazy to be hearing a voice that no one else heard.

"If you heard a snake, it's completely possible that one may have wandered into the castle and is looking for a mouse to eat. You could have heard it seeking its dinner."

Harry thought this over and agreed that it was a logical explanation. "Yes, sir."

"But, I will alert the heads of house," promised Dumbledore. "If there is any danger, I want the students back in their common rooms and everyone accounted for."

"Yes, sir. Thank you, sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Twist, for letting us know what you had heard. Professor McGonagall will escort you and Miss Granger back to Gryffindor common room now."

And, as Harry and Hermione followed Professor McGonagall back to their rooms, they heard Dumbledore's magnified voice issue

throughout the castle, advising students to return to their common room right away. "Well," thought Harry, "if there is some crazed person out there, looking to kill, everyone should be safe tonight."

Everyone wondered why they had been ordered to their common room, but Harry and Hermione didn't say a word. So, while rumors abounded, no one knew that Harry had heard a disembodied voice threatening to kill.

Hermione spent the next few weeks researching everything she could about snakes. Her research uncovered information about a monstrous snake called a basilisk. She believed, and Harry was inclined to agree with her, that the monster in the Chamber of Secrets was a basilisk. Legend had it that looking into the eyes of the basilisk was deadly. But, looking into its eyes through a reflection (such as a mirror) would result in petrification. Since Mrs. Norris had been petrified, Harry agreed that it was possible that the snake he had heard coming from the walls was the voice of a basilisk. And, if the monster in the Chamber of Secrets was a basilisk, Hagrid was innocent. The enormous spider that Tom Riddle had discovered Hagrid hiding was not from the Chamber. But, how to prove this?

Only a few weeks before the end of term, Harry noticed that Ginny was starting to look very pale again. Should he tell her that he knew that Hagrid was innocent? But, how could he explain without telling her that he thought he had heard a basilisk speaking in the walls of Hogwarts? And, then, something occurred that made Harry wish he had taken Ginny into his confidence.

Walking to the Quidditch pitch with his housemates to see a game, they heard Professor McGonagall's voice, magnified as Dumbledore's had been just weeks before, sounding throughout the castle. "All students are to return to their common room immediately!"

Harry hurried back to the castle and, in the common room, met Professor McGonagall. She was shaking slightly and her voice was hoarse. She looked over the assembled students and her eyes lingered on the Weasley brothers. Harry noticed that Ginny was not

there and hoped that she would not get into trouble for not having returned to the common room when ordered.

“It is with great regret that I have to tell you all that a tragedy has befallen the school. We will be arranging for everyone to be sent home tomorrow, as the school is no longer safe.”

The students looked at each other in shock. Many of the children asked, “What do you mean, ‘not safe’?” “What has happened?”

Professor McGonagall had to hold her hand up to restore quiet. “The Chamber of Secrets has been opened and the monster has taken a student into the Chamber itself.”

Gasps filled the room. In response to the unspoken question, Professor McGonagall announced, her voice breaking, “Ginny Weasley.”

The Weasley brothers all yelled, “No!” Fred and George tried to leave the common room, but Professor McGonagall told them that they couldn’t leave. “No one knows where the Chamber of Secrets is! Where would you even go?”

They had no response to this and, angrily, pummeled the chair to relieve their tension. Ron buried his head in his hands, grieving. Percy just kept muttering, “Ginny,” under his breath.

Harry didn’t know what to do. This was his fault. He had known that Ginny had been upset about something. He should have kept a closer eye on her. Now, she was in the Chamber of Secrets (wherever that was) and at the mercy of a basilisk. Was there any chance she was still alive?

That diary Ginny had found held the answers. Yes, Tom Riddle had been wrong that Hagrid had opened the Chamber before, but it was Tom’s diary that had been upsetting Ginny. It just couldn’t be a coincidence that a diary that told lies about the Chamber of Secrets was in the possession of the one student snatched by the monster and taken into the Chamber.

But, how did knowing that the diary was a clue help him to find out who had opened the Chamber or where it was? He could think of nothing. In desperation, he decided to visit Myrtle again. Perhaps, when Ginny had tried flushing the book down the toilet, she had said something – anything! – that would help him now.

Harry waited until most of the common room was empty before he tried to leave. Even Ron had finally taken himself off to bed. Harry was immediately stopped by Percy, the prefect. "I'm sorry, Mark. No one's allowed to leave the common room. You heard what Professor McGonagall said."

"Yes, Percy. I know. But, there's something I need to tell Professor Dumbledore right away. Something that might help him find Ginny."

"What? What do you want to tell him?"

"I can't tell you. I have to speak with Dumbledore."

Percy looked at Harry suspiciously. "Are you the heir of Slytherin?" he demanded, roughly. "Did you take my sister?"

"No!" Harry was shocked that Percy could think this. "I would never hurt Ginny. Never!"

"What's going on here?" demanded Fred and George, who had noticed Percy speaking with Harry.

"He said he knows something that can help Ginny and he needs to see Dumbledore," explained Percy, waving his hand toward Harry.

"What do you know?" demanded Fred, his eyes lighting up.

"I...I can't tell you," said Harry. Fred looked ready to wring it out of the younger boy by force, but George put a restraining hand on Fred's shoulder.

George said, in a would-be calm voice, "What do you know, Mark?" The edge in his voice made clear that he, too, was ready to resort to violence if Harry didn't speak up.

"I know," said a voice from behind the boys. The Weasley brothers turned around and saw Hermione standing at the bottom of the stairs to the girls' dormitory, in her night robe.

"What?!" demanded the three brothers. As they strode over to Hermione, Harry took the opportunity to duck out the door. He knew that Hermione would tell them that she and "Mark" had figured out that the monster was a basilisk.

Despite what Harry had told Percy, he did not try to find Dumbledore. What was the point of telling Dumbledore that he thought the monster was a basilisk? He needed to know where the Chamber of Secrets was!

Outside the girls' bathroom that Myrtle haunted, Harry saw the message left by the heir of Slytherin written in blood on the wall, underneath the first message. "Her skeleton will lie in the Chamber for ever." No!

Harry hurried inside the bathroom and called for Myrtle.

"Oh, hi," Myrtle said shyly. Even though he had been looking for her, Harry jumped when she appeared. Ghosts were always so startling, the way they just popped out of walls and things. "I was hoping you'd come back to visit."

"Myrtle, I really need your help. A girl, Ginny Weasley, is missing and we all think she's been taken into the Chamber of Secrets. When she came here before, to flush the diary down the toilet, did she say anything – anything at all – that might indicate where the Chamber of Secrets might be?"

Myrtle looked annoyed. "She was the girl who flushed the diary down my toilet?"

"Yes, Myrtle. But, she really didn't mean to upset you. She was trying to get rid of the diary because she thought it told lies. Please can't you help?"

“Well,” Myrtle pouted and whined, “she didn’t say anything to me. Not everyone’s like you, taking time to speak with a ghost. I guess they think they’re too good for me.”

“So, she didn’t say anything? You don’t have any idea where the Chamber of Secrets might be?” Harry was so disappointed, he could taste it. He knew that there was a very slim chance that Myrtle would be of help, but he so desperately wanted her to know something, it was devastating that she didn’t.

“I didn’t say that!” said Myrtle, coyly. “I said that girl didn’t say anything to me. But, I do know where she went.”

“What?!”

Myrtle smirked, pleased by Harry’s reaction. “Yes. I saw her open the sink over there and go inside a tunnel.”

Harry followed Myrtle’s pointing finger and saw a large sink. He examined it closely and saw a tiny snake engraved on the side of one of the copper taps. Taking a breath, Harry looked closely at the snake, tried to imagine it was real, and said, “Open up.”

Immediately, the sink sank into the floor and a wide pipe was exposed.

“Hey, that’s the strange language she used to open the sink,” said Myrtle. “That’s also how the boy sounded who opened the sink when I was killed fifty years ago. What are you speaking?”

Harry turned around to face Myrtle. “You mean you were killed fifty years ago, by the boy who opened this sink?”

“Yes,” said Myrtle.

“What did the boy look like?”

“I didn’t see his face. I just heard his voice, speaking the same language you just spoke.”

“Myrtle, I’m going into the Chamber to try to find Ginny Weasley. Can you please find Professor Dumbledore and tell him where the Chamber is and that I’ve gone in here?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” said Myrtle doubtfully. “Ghosts aren’t supposed to bother the headmaster.”

“I promise you, Professor Dumbledore will be glad you told him.” When Myrtle still seemed unsure, Harry said cleverly, “You will be the most important ghost in Hogwarts, Myrtle. No one else knows where the Chamber is.”

Myrtle shimmered brightly. “You’re right! I’ll do it!” And, without waiting any longer, she turned and left the bathroom, disappearing through the side wall.

Harry held his wand out in front of him, like a flashlight, took a breath and jumped into the dark pipe.

AN – Isn’t it calling you? The little button at the bottom? Please review! Thanks!

Chapter Nine – Year Two; Tom Riddle

Harry slid down the pipe for a long time. He judged he was miles under the school, most probably under the lake. When he finally slid out of the end of the pipe, his feet crunched dead rat skulls. He could only pray that he wouldn't find Ginny like this.

After walking down a long corridor, Harry came to a solid wall, into which intertwining stone serpents had been carved. Again, imagining them to be alive, Harry whispered "Open" in parseltongue. The wall parted and Harry walked into a huge chamber.

Expecting at any minute to be confronting a basilisk, Harry was shaking as he entered the chamber. At the far end, he saw a small, robed figure lying on the ground, at the feet of a large stone statue of a wizard. The red hair spilling onto the ground identified the unconscious form as Ginny before Harry was able to even see her face. Harry ran to her side and, falling to his knees, placed his wand on the ground so he could turn her over. He didn't notice the wand rolling away. He was focused entirely on the young girl at his side.

Harry searched frantically for a pulse. "Ginny, please wake up!"

"She won't wake," said a soft voice.

Harry jumped and turned around. Tom Riddle was leaning against a column. It was strange, but Harry felt as if he were seeing Tom through a haze. "Tom? Tom Riddle? How can you be here?"

"I am a memory."

"I don't understand." But, without waiting for an answer, Harry continued, "Please help me. The basilisk may come at any minute and I've got to get Ginny out of here."

"The basilisk won't come until I call it."

"What do you mean?"

“I’ve been wanting to speak with you, Mark Twist. Ginny told me all about how you killed Quirrell and defeated the Dark Lord last year. She admires you greatly. She poured her soul into my diary and I, in turn, poured my soul back into her. The soul of my sixteen year old self that I had preserved in the diary I had created while at Hogwarts, in order to protect the secret of how to open the Chamber of Secrets.”

Tom smirked. “Have you not guessed, Mark Twist? Ginny was the one who opened the Chamber of Secrets. Of course, I was controlling her at the time. I made her write her farewell message on the wall. What a silly girl. How tiresome listening to her cry.”

Harry felt his temper rise but he held his tongue, knowing that he should learn as much as he could. He was all too aware that Tom was holding his wand. He should have been more careful – he had let his guard down for a brief moment and had lost his wand. If he and Ginny were to have any chance of escaping, he would need to be smarter from now on.

Tom continued, “She told me that you have been concerned about her all year; that you’ve been watching her. I brought Ginny here because I knew that you would follow her and I wanted to speak with you.”

“Why did you want to speak with me?” Harry asked, puzzled.

“A muggleborn! Yet, you speak parseltongue. Ginny told me how the whole school was buzzing with the news. She is angry that they think you might be the next Dark Lord. The powerful Mark Twist who defeated Voldemort last year. How did you do it?” Suddenly, Tom’s voice sharpened. He leaned forward and his eyes pierced Harry’s. “How did a muggleborn defeat the great Lord Voldemort?”

“Why do you care?” asked Harry. “Voldemort was after your time.”

“Voldemort is my past, present and future,” said Tom. He waved Harry’s wand and the name “Tom Marvolo Riddle” appeared, floating in the air. With another wave of the wand, the letters changed positions and formed the words “I am Lord Voldemort.”

“You see? I had no intention of keeping the name of my filthy muggle father. I have the noble blood of Salazar Slytherin in my veins, through my mother’s side. I fashioned a new name while I was at Hogwarts, a name that I knew wizards would one day fear to speak, when I had become the greatest sorcerer in the world. So, Mark Twist, before I kill you, and use Ginny’s soul to be reborn again as my sixteen year old self, tell me how you managed to defeat Voldemort.”

Harry knew that he didn’t have a chance of defeating Tom, but he must try. How? Tom was holding his wand. Even if he could retrieve it, Tom was a more accomplished wizard than Harry and would surely be able to overpower him. But, time was running out. He could tell that Tom’s shape was becoming sharper, and that Ginny seemed to be turning whiter and more waxen.

I must keep calm, Harry told himself, and hope that Myrtle alerts Dumbledore quickly and that Dumbledore arrives in time to save us all. Relying on instinct, the younger boy decided to try to anger Tom. Angry people make mistakes, Harry thought.

“You want to know how I defeated Voldemort last year?” he asked. “It wasn’t hard. You were just a wreck. You were barely alive, ugly and foul. You had to live on the back of the head of a mediocre wizard. And, I was eleven. So, no problem. After all, you were killed by a baby when you were in your prime.”

“What?” whispered Tom, in disbelief and fury.

“Yes,” taunted Harry. “Didn’t Ginny tell you the story of Harry Potter? Just a baby. You tried to kill him but your curse rebounded and hit you instead. You were destroyed and wandered without a body until you were able to find a wizard willing to let you stick out of the back of his head. What a joke! The greatest sorcerer in the world!”

“You lie!”

Harry just smirked. Furious, Tom yelled, “Avada Kedavra” and a green light shot toward Harry. Okay, maybe I made him too angry, Harry thought as he ducked and the spell hit the stone statue behind him.

A huge hole appeared in the right leg of the huge statue. Recalled to himself, Tom muttered, "Yes. I'll teach you a little lesson. I will let my little pet show you the powers of Lord Voldemort, heir of Salazar Slytherin." Looking into the stone face of Slytherin, Tom said in parseltongue, "Speak to me, Slytherin, greatest of the Hogwarts Four."

While Tom was speaking to the statue, Harry had bent down to Ginny's prone figure again. He felt inside her robes and held his breath until he found what he was looking for: her wand.

From inside the statue came the sound of rustling and the basilisk slithered into sight. Harry closed his eyes tightly and, pointing the wand in the direction where he knew the basilisk was emerging from the statue, yelled the conjunctivitis hex. He heard a roaring of pain and, daring to open his eyes, saw that the basilisk – huge beyond belief – was waving its head in agony, as its lids closed over its inflamed eyes.

"Kill the boy," Tom yelled. "Sniff - smell him!"

But, the basilisk was writhing in agony and was beyond listening to Tom. The beast was out of control and, when its tail came close to crushing him, Tom seemed to realize that he was in as much danger from the creature as Harry. Tom pointed Harry's wand at the basilisk and yelled, "Avada Kedvara." The monster fell to the ground, dead.

It had all happened so quickly. Tom seemed shocked at having had to kill his pet. Before Tom could recover, Harry pointed the wand at Tom, who was still staring in disbelief at the basilisk, and yelled, "Expelliarmus!" Harry's wand flew from Tom's hand and Harry caught it with his left hand.

Tom's eyes flared, with a hint of red darting in and out. Not speaking, Tom strode to the basilisk. At first, Harry thought that Tom was just so upset at the creature's death, that he was stroking it farewell. However, when Tom turned around, Harry realized that the older boy had reached inside the basilisk's mouth to pull out a large fang. Before Harry could shout any spell, Tom had pulled back his arm and

flung the fang like a sword at Harry. The fang sank deep into Harry's arm, just above the elbow.

"I'm going to sit here and watch you die, Mark Twist. Take your time. I'm in no hurry."

Harry felt dizzy and he collapsed next to Ginny. As he fell, he felt the edge of Tom Riddle's diary, which had been poking out of a pocket in Ginny's robes, dig into his leg. Without thinking, Harry pulled the fang from his arm and plunged it into the diary.

Tom gave a loud, shrill scream. Ink poured out of the diary, soaking Harry's robes and dripping onto the floor next to him. Within moments, Tom was gone and Ginny stirred.

Harry felt his head become mushier and he felt himself start to lose consciousness. From a distance he heard a comforting trill. He recognized that sound. He had heard it before in Dumbledore's office. Fawkes! Dumbledore must be coming.

Harry felt Fawkes land next to him and, then, strangely, the bird was crying and its tears landed on the wound left by the basilisk. Harry watched in amazement as the wound healed, leaving no scar.

"Mark! Ginny!"

It was Dumbledore's voice.

"We're here, Professor!" Harry called. And, smiling at Ginny, who was crying weakly and struggling to sit up, he waited for Dumbledore to arrive.

An exhausted Harry sat quietly in a chair in Professor McGonagall's office as Dumbledore bade Mr. and Mrs. Weasley goodbye. Ginny's parents had been called to the school when their daughter had been captured by the "monster" and had been with Professor McGonagall, the head of Ginny's house, when Dumbledore had returned with the children from the Chamber of Secrets. The Weasleys had been

beyond ecstatic at the safe return of their daughter and had thanked “Mark Twist” repeatedly. Ginny had thanked Harry too, but mostly she just cried.

Harry had explained that Ginny had been possessed by the spirit of Tom Riddle, somehow living within the diary. The Weasleys had been shocked to learn that Riddle was a young Lord Voldemort, but Dumbledore had confirmed that this was true.

After the explanations had been given, the Weasleys left to take Ginny to the hospital wing for Madam Pomfrey to take a close look at her, and to tell their sons the news of Ginny’s safe return. At Dumbledore’s request, Professor McGonagall had left to tell the kitchens that a feast was to be held that night. When Harry started to leave the office as well, Dumbledore requested that Harry remain behind for a moment.

When Dumbledore sat back down in his chair and gazed quietly at Harry, Harry thought he felt a strange buzzing in his head, similar to the feeling he had experienced during the sorting ceremony when he had wondered whether the Ministry of Magic representative was trying to read his mind. Harry automatically shook his head and gave a sort of mental “push” to stop the sensation. The buzzing stopped and Dumbledore leaned back in his chair. Harry gazed back at the older man, suspiciously. The headmaster had been trying to read his mind. He was sure of it.

“Mark, the school owes you a debt of gratitude. You saved Ginny Weasley’s life and rid Hogwarts of the danger within the Chamber of Secrets. You will receive a Special Award for Services to the School.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Harry, cautiously. He would have liked to leave the office as quickly as possible, because he didn’t entirely trust the headmaster not to try to read his mind again. But, there was something he had to mention first. “Professor Dumbledore, Tom Riddle showed me how he made everyone believe that Hagrid had opened the Chamber of Secrets in the past, and that Hagrid was expelled because of this. Now we know that Hagrid was innocent!”

Dumbledore smiled, pleased. "Yes, Mark. We will make sure that Hagrid's name is cleared. That is yet another debt that we owe you."

Harry couldn't wait to tell Hagrid the good news. Hoping to draw his meeting with Dumbledore to a close, he stood up to leave. Before he could say goodbye, the door to the chamber opened violently and Lucius Malfoy entered, simmering with fury. Huddled behind Mr. Malfoy was a strange little creature, cowering. Harry had never seen one before, but he recognized a house elf from pictures he had seen.

"Good evening, Lucius," said Dumbledore in a calm voice.

The other man ignored the pleasantry. "I heard that a monster was loose in the school, placing our children in mortal peril and yet you have not seen fit to close the school and send the children home. I want to see my son immediately; I'll be taking him home."

"You are behind in the news, Lucius. The monster – a basilisk – has been killed and the school is completely safe."

Mr. Malfoy was clearly taken aback by the news, but he regrouped quickly. "I am pleased, of course, to learn that the school is safe. I don't understand how such a danger could have existed in the school without your having been aware of it," he criticized.

"The basilisk was in...hibernation...for many years. It was released by Lord Voldemort, acting through somebody else: Arthur Weasley's daughter, Ginny. By means of this diary." Dumbledore held up the book, now rather the worse for wear after having been stabbed through its heart by the basilisk fang. "A clever plan," continued Dumbledore, "because Arthur is known for his pro-Muggle stance. If it were learned that his daughter was attacking muggleborns, it would have destroyed his family and undermined legislation for muggle protection."

The little elf caught Harry's eye. It was a pathetic creature, battered and bruised. It was clear that he was not well treated by the Malfoys. The elf pointed to the diary and then to Lucius Malfoy. Strangely, the creature then punched himself in the head. He repeated this strange dance a few times and, finally, Harry understood. The elf was trying

to tell him that his master was connected to the diary. Suddenly, Harry recalled that Mr. Malfoy had taken Ginny's books from her in Diagon Alley, the day he and the Weasleys had purchased their school supplies. How easy it would have been for Mr. Malfoy to have placed the diary among Ginny's books when he had returned them to her.

Harry nodded to the elf, showing that he understood his silent message. Harry was relieved to see the elf stop hurting himself.

Mr. Malfoy swallowed and said stiffly, "It is fortunate that the diary was obviously destroyed. By whom, may I ask?"

"By Mark Twist, here," Dumbledore gestured toward Harry, standing off to the side.

Mr. Malfoy regarded Harry in silence, his eyes narrowed coldly. "Ah. Mark Twist. You are the muggleborn I met in Diagon Alley."

"Yes, sir," said Harry. "The day you gave the diary to Ginny Weasley."

Mr. Malfoy clenched his hands into fists. "Prove it," he hissed.

"Oh, no one will be able to do that," said Dumbledore. "But, I would advise you, Lucius, not to give out any more of Lord Voldemort's old school things."

Mr. Malfoy glared at Dumbledore and then turned to his house elf and said, "We're going, Dobby!" He kicked the elf through the door, and they could hear Dobby cry out in pain as Mr. Malfoy's footsteps faded down the corridor.

"Professor Dumbledore!" cried Harry. "He kicked that elf. How can he do that? Why didn't you stop him?"

Dumbledore sighed, sadly. "It's a terrible crime how wizards treat our magical brethren. A house elf like Dobby is basically enslaved to the family he serves. That family can treat him any way they please. Many wizards are kind to their elves but, unfortunately, the Malfoys are not."

Harry was appalled. "Can nothing be done? How can he be freed?"

"The only way for a house elf to be freed is for his master to give him clothes. I'm afraid there's nothing we can do."

Harry couldn't believe it. He recalled all too vividly how his uncle and cousin would hit him and how no one intervened. It was the same thing! He couldn't stand by and let someone else be hurt and just shrug his shoulders and say he couldn't do anything! Harry's eyes fell on the diary and he had an idea

"Professor Dumbledore, can I give that diary back to Mr. Malfoy, please?"

"Certainly," said the headmaster, somewhat surprised.

Harry grabbed the diary and, rushing out of the office, ran to catch up with Mr. Malfoy. Right before he caught up with him, Harry pulled off his sock, stuffed it into the diary, and put his shoe back on. "Mr. Malfoy," he called.

The older man turned at his name. With his nose curled in a sneer, he waited for Harry to approach him. "You forgot this," Harry gasped, and he shoved the book into Mr. Malfoy's hand.

Mr. Malfoy opened the book, saw the sock, threw it away, and stared in anger at the diary. He raised his eyes to Harry and said softly, "You had better watch your step, Mr. Twist. Not everyone is as fond of muggleborns as the Weasleys or Dumbledore."

He turned to leave and called, "Come, Dobby!"

But, the house elf didn't obey. "Master has given Dobby a sock," the elf uttered in amazement, staring at the sock he had caught. "Dobby is free!"

Mr. Malfoy stared in disbelief at his elf. Then, turning to Harry, he shouted, "You've lost me my servant, boy!" He strode toward Harry

with his hands curled in anticipation of throttling the boy, but Dobby thrust himself in front of the furious man.

“You shall not harm Mark Twist!” Dobby pointed his finger at Mr. Malfoy and, with some sort of elf magic, tossed his former master into the air. “You shall go now!” demanded Dobby.

With no choice, Mr. Malfoy left, casting a burning stare at Harry, which promised retribution. Harry shivered.

“You freed Dobby!” cried the elf.

“I wish I could free all elves,” said Harry. “No one should ever be abused. And I won’t stand by and watch it happen.”

“You are a great wizard. Dobby will not forget your kindness.” Dobby hugged Harry tightly.

Unsure what to do, Harry patted the elf awkwardly. Sobbing, the elf bade goodbye, and disappeared with a loud crack.

Harry stared in surprise at the place where the elf had been. He had thought that no one could apparate within Hogwarts walls but, obviously, elf magic was different from wizard magic. With a tired yawn, Harry wondered whether he had enough energy to enjoy the feast. It had been a very long day. Oh, well, he could sleep another time! He made his way toward the Great Hall, to join his friends.

Dumbledore watched the young boy leave the office to run after Lucius Malfoy, to attempt to free the house elf, if he were not mistaken. What an interesting child, the headmaster thought. The boy cares about house elves and he obviously risked his life to save the Weasley girl. So, kind and brave. But, one could not overlook the odd fact (coincidence?) that, of all the students at Hogwarts, the Riddle diary had found its way into Mark Twist’s hands. A boy who had confronted Voldemort just the year before. Why was Voldemort drawn to the boy? A boy who spoke parseltongue.

While the headmaster didn't necessarily believe that all parselmouths were dark wizards, it was true that this talent was very rare. He would bet that the last parselmouth at Hogwarts had been Tom Riddle himself, a descendant of Slytherin. Could Mark Twist unknowingly be a descendant of Slytherin, as well? Was he a relative of Voldemort's? It might make sense to make some inquiries into the boy's parentage. A muggleborn? Perhaps, there was a witch or wizard a generation or two in the past. He would look into it.

However, before Dumbledore took any steps to look into Mark Twist's background, something occurred to drive all thought of the boy's parentage out of his mind. Harry Potter was found.

Chapter Ten –Year Three Begins; Harry Potter Found

The beginning of the summer was basically a repeat of the previous year for Harry, back at his old job, living in his old boarding house.

Harry had hoped to stay with Ron again during at least part of the summer. However, Arthur Weasley won some money in an office pool at the Ministry and the family decided to use the money on a trip to Egypt to visit the eldest son, Bill, who was working there as a curse-breaker for Gringotts. Harry tried to be happy for Ron, but it was hard not to feel extremely jealous. The Weasleys looked so happy in the newspaper photograph taken of the family which Ron had enclosed in the letter he had sent Harry explaining the family's good fortune. Even Ron's pet rat, Scabbers, perched on Ron's shoulder in the picture, got to visit Egypt! And he, Harry, was stuck busing tables during the summer.

However, the disappointment over not being able to visit Ron during the summer faded to the back of Harry's mind when he received Hermione's birthday letter. Hermione's letter had enclosed the expected birthday greetings. But, she had added a postscript that rocked Harry's world. "Mark, I suspect that you don't receive any news of the wizarding world during the summer. I have a subscription to the Daily Prophet. You won't believe the amazing thing that happened! Harry Potter has been found! I'm enclosing the article all about it. See you in September!"

"What?!" Harry's yell was so loud, that the owl that had brought him Hermione's letter let out a shrill squawk. Squirrels nearby froze and then raced for their treetop homes. Luckily, there were no people around as Harry was always careful to find an out-of-the way site to transform into his younger Mark Twist self, to wait for any owls that might be looking to deliver a letter to the now-thirteen year old boy.

Harry dropped Hermione's letter and turned impatiently to the enclosed article. He tried to read it so fast, it made no sense to him. He forced himself to slow down. The headline, screaming "Harry Potter Found!," took up almost half the page. Underneath the headline, taking up the rest of the page, was the picture of a young

boy, with dark hair and brown eyes. He was good-looking but his narrowed eyes and unsmiling mouth detracted a bit from his looks.

Turning to a second sheet, Harry began reading the article about the miraculous discovery of Harry Potter.

The Boy-Who-Lived Lives!

by Rita Skeeter

The wizarding world rejoiced today as the Boy-Who-Lived was found, unharmed and in good health. While Harry Potter was not forthcoming about the details surrounding his disappearance, an unnamed Ministry official revealed exclusively to this reporter that Harry had apparently been in the United States during the last two years. This explains the hint of an American accent that sometimes can be heard in his speech.

This anonymous source reported: "He was hiding in an alleyway when we first found him. We had received some reports of suspected underage magic and we went to check it out. We found this boy who was obviously living on the streets. He tried to run away but we were able to corner him.

"He said his name was Peter Jenson. He had blond hair and blue eyes. But, we thought to ourselves, what if it's Harry Potter? After all, there aren't too many wizard kids that need to be hiding, right? So, we checked to see if he was using a glamour charm and he was! His hair and eyes turned dark brown. So, of course, we knew who we had found. We were that excited! We took him straight back to the Ministry and he met with the Minister himself. Albus Dumbledore came to interview the boy, too.

"At first, the boy denied that he's Harry Potter. But, then he started to admit he might be. Everyone was asking why he had run away and where has he been hiding. He wouldn't say much.

"Of course, we all wondered about what happened to his scar. Finally, Harry said he was afraid that it would give him away, so he had a wizard in the States cast a strong disillusionment charm on it directly,

so that it stayed hidden even when the glamour charm was lifted. The Minister wanted to have the disillusionment charm lifted too, but the boy became very upset. So, they decided to let it alone.

“Dumbledore apologized to Harry for having left him with his relatives. The boy didn’t say much, but he nodded as if he understood. Everyone was so happy to see him that, after a while, you could see that Harry was starting to relax.”

So, what will happen to Harry Potter now? Is the Ministry to be trusted to protect the Boy-Who-Lived? Well, Harry is being kept under close watch now and is expected to attend Hogwarts in the Fall. I am sure that I speak for all of us when I say that we will be keeping an eye on the Ministry to make sure that it does right by our little savior. Welcome home, Mr. Potter[See page 5 for history of Harry Potter’s defeat of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named

Harry could barely believe his eyes. He had to read the article through twice to understand what had happened. Turning back to the picture of the boy, Harry studied his face carefully. Harry had been the victim of abuse himself and he thought he could recognize the signs in this boy as well: the mistrust deep in his eyes, the air of waiting for something bad to happen, the strained expression in the face.

Harry suspected that this fake Harry Potter was actually a runaway. Probably from the States, but pretending to be British. The boy had decided to take advantage of being mistaken for Harry Potter. And, really, Harry could hardly blame him. If the boy was able to convince people that he wasn’t Harry Potter, then they would obviously start to ask who he was. If he was in hiding, the last thing he wanted was for anyone to be looking into his real identity.

Harry wasn’t sure how he felt about this pretender. He, Harry, had adopted a false identity too. But, while he wasn’t using his real name, he felt irritated that someone else would use it instead. He tried to be rational about the situation by telling himself that this false Harry would actually make him, the real Harry, safer. Any Death Eaters out there looking to kill Harry would focus on this boy instead. But, no matter how he tried to put a positive spin on this development, Harry

couldn't help feeling that this boy had stolen something very valuable from him.

Harry didn't see Ron or Hermione again until on board the Hogwarts Express, heading back to another school year. The train seemed particularly crowded and they had a difficult time finding a compartment free. Finally, they decided to share a compartment with a man sleeping in the corner. His luggage label proclaimed the sleeping man to be "Professor R.J. Lupin," who they surmised must be their new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher.

Trying not to wake Professor Lupin, the three friends chattered eagerly about the events of their summer. Having exhausted his tales of Egypt, Ron brought up the topic Harry was dying to discuss. Leaning back casually in his seat, Ron said idly, "I wonder what Harry Potter's like. He'll be in our year and, if he's sorted into Gryffindor, he'll be sharing our dorm room. Won't that be fabulous?"

Harry tried to keep his voice even as he replied, "It would be great. He's probably on the train, right? Why don't we go find him and say hello?"

"Harry's already at Hogwarts," answered Ron. "He's been there since he was found. Hogwarts is the safest place for him, what with Sirius Black after him and all."

Hermione gasped. "Sirius Black! What makes you think that he's after Harry?"

"I overheard my dad telling my mom that, right before Sirius Black escaped from Azkaban, the guards heard him muttering, 'He's at Hogwarts.' Obviously, that's why Black escaped. To find Harry Potter, now that he's turned up again."

"What are you talking about? Who's Sirius Black?" asked Harry.

At first, Ron looked scandalized that Harry didn't know but, then remembered that his friend didn't receive the Daily Prophet during the

summer. He gave Harry a quick summary of current events. "Sirius Black was a Death Eater who was caught after You Know Who was defeated by Harry Potter. He blew up a street, killing a dozen muggles and a wizard before he was captured. He's been at the wizard prison, Azkaban, for the past 12 years. However, right after Potter was found, Black escaped from Azkaban. No one knows how. It's never been done before. The Ministry has been going crazy trying to find him. My father's had to put in long hours responding to false alarms."

"I thought your father worked in the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts department," said Hermione. "Why would he be looking for Black?"

"Everyone has been pulled into the search," explained Ron. "Not that anything's turned up, though. Black has vanished completely. But, they know where he's going. He's after Harry Potter. So, the school will be under heavy guard this year. There are even going to be..." Ron looked in the corner to check that the teacher was still asleep, and whispered dramatically, "Dementors guarding the school."

"No!" breathed Hermione. "Dumbledore wouldn't permit it!"

Ron was satisfied with Hermione's reaction. "He didn't want to, but he agreed. After all, he can't have anything happen to Potter on his watch, can he? He's already gotten a lot of flak for having left Potter with those abusive relatives and then for losing him for so long. Dumbledore will do whatever he has to do to keep Potter safe."

Vaguely remembering some information he had read, Harry asked tentatively, "Dementors are the guards of Azkaban?"

Ron nodded. "They are horrible creatures. They suck the happiness from people. They say that, if the Dementors catch Black, they have permission to give him a 'kiss'. This means that they can suck the soul from his body!"

"That's awful!" said Harry and Hermione in unison.

Ron shrugged. "He's a dangerous criminal. I guess they're afraid that, if he's found, he could just escape again."

“Anyway, because of him, Potter’s been at Hogwarts for the last few weeks. He’s probably being tutored because he hasn’t been attending school the last few years, now has he? He won’t be able to join our grade unless he can catch up.”

As the friends lapsed into a companionable silence, Harry wondered about Sirius Black. As he had feared when he had first learned of his history, a Death Eater was looking to kill Harry Potter. This was one of the reasons that he had chosen to disguise himself. It seemed odd that another boy was perhaps in danger, as a result of claiming to be Harry Potter. Harry told himself that this other boy had chosen to steal his name and deserved whatever he got. But, he didn’t feel comfortable knowing that another person might be harmed because a killer was really looking for him.

Harry comforted himself with thoughts that Dumbledore would protect the pretender. And, one silver lining in having a fake Harry Potter running around was that Harry suspected that it would attract attention away from “Mark Twist.” Harry had worried that he was attracting too much attention in the last few years. He had wanted to keep a low profile, but killing Quirrell and defeating Voldemort in his first year, and then speaking parseltongue and defeating a teenage Voldemort in his second year, was not the way to go about it.

Suddenly, the train lurched to a halt and the lights went out. “What’s wrong?” asked Ron.

“We’re not at Hogwarts yet,” said Hermione.

The door of the compartment opened and, in the darkness, Neville Longbottom stumbled inside, falling over their feet. Ginny Weasley also felt her way into the compartment, wanting the protection of both her brother and Mark Twist, who had been her savior the year before. The children jostled for position and gave cries of pain when an elbow was jabbed into a side, or toes were stepped upon.

“Quiet!” ordered a deep voice. Professor Lupin had awoken. He muttered a spell and a dim light lit the compartment. The children

looked at each other nervously as the train seemed to get colder and a strange depression fell upon them.

The door of the compartment slowly opened again. A cloaked figure appeared in the door frame. Although its face was hidden, Harry glimpsed a skeletal hand for a moment, before it, too, was pulled beneath the cloak. The creature took a deep breath and, as it inhaled, seemed to suck the warmth from the room.

Harry felt as if he had been plunged into icy water. His limbs turned heavy and non-responsive and he felt his brain become foggy. From a distance, he heard his aunt say, "I can no longer deny that you are evil and I will not pollute my family anymore with your presence. I want you out of here!" Vying with his aunt for attention, he heard his uncle shouting, "Boy! You are a freak and you should never have been born! You're lucky we took you in because no one else would ever want you!"

"Mark! Mark! Are you all right?"

Harry shook his head and opened his eyes. He was lying on the floor and, shakily, with Ron supporting his shoulders, he sat up and then climbed back into his seat. He felt sick. Dimly, he realized that the train was moving again.

"Are you OK?" asked Ron.

Harry nodded slowly, and swallowed hard. "What happened?" he whispered.

"That was a Dementor," explained Professor Lupin, breaking off a piece of chocolate from a bar he held in his hand, and handing it to Harry. "It was checking the train to make sure that Sirius Black wasn't hiding somewhere."

Harry took the piece of chocolate and stared at it as if he had never seen a piece of chocolate before. "Eat it," urged the Professor. "It will help you recover from the effects of the Dementor. Now, please excuse me, but I need to speak with the conductor."

After he left, Harry's friends crowded around him and he assured them again that he was okay. "But, did any of you pass out, like me?"

They shook their heads. "But, it was awful," Ron admitted. "I felt like I would never be cheerful again."

Neville nodded in agreement. "It was so cold. It was horrible."

Harry did not feel comforted. Why was he affected so much more than the other kids? Distractedly, he took a bite of the chocolate and was surprised that it really did make him feel better. It acted like hot chocolate, spreading warmth throughout his body.

A short time later, they arrived at Hogsmeade and took the horseless carriage up to Hogwarts castle. Peering out of the carriage as they passed through the gates, Harry saw two Dementors standing guard. The intense cold started to cloud his mind again, and Harry quickly leaned back inside the carriage, and waited for the sickness to pass as they left the Dementors behind and entered Hogwarts grounds.

As Harry stepped down from the carriage, he heard the hated drawl of Draco Malfoy. "Is it true you fainted, Twist? You actually fainted? I guess it's your weak muggle blood showing." He would have said more but he noticed Professor Lupin approaching and obviously thought better of continuing to bait Harry when a teacher could overhear.

Harry refused to respond. Ignoring Malfoy, he shoved his way inside the castle and made his way to the Great Hall. He sat down at the Gryffindor table, eager to forget about Dementors and focus on the feast.

He noticed that Hermione wasn't there and asked Ron where she was. Unconcerned, Ron shrugged and said that Professor McGonagall had wanted to see her for a minute. Hermione arrived back at the table a short time later and confirmed that McGonagall had just wanted to speak with her about her course schedule.

The Sorting ceremony took place quickly and the first years soon joined their new houses. Harry wondered whether he had looked as young or as scared when he had been sorted.

Harry noticed that Ron and a number of other students were turning their heads and looking around as if searching for something. "What's the matter? What are you looking for?" he asked.

"I'm trying to see if I can spot Harry Potter," said Ron excitedly. "He's got to be here somewhere."

Harry was surprised that he had momentarily forgotten about the boy pretending to be him. He, too, looked around but couldn't see anyone resembling the picture in the Daily Prophet.

When everyone was seated, Dumbledore stood up and silence immediately fell upon the room. "Welcome! Welcome to another year at Hogwarts! I have some things to say to you all, and I think it best to get it out of the way before you become befuddled by our excellent feast..."

The students leaned forward in their chairs, listening intently. "As you no doubt are aware, we are incredibly pleased to announce that Harry Potter has been found safe and sound." The room erupted in spontaneous applause. Harry noticed that the Slytherin table didn't join in. "Yes, yes." Dumbledore smiled. "Mr. Potter will be attending classes this year and, in order to help smooth his transition, we had privately asked the Sorting Hat to sort him into his house. Mr. Potter will be joining Slytherin."

Gasps were heard and then mutters, "Slytherin? Did he say Slytherin? Isn't there some mistake?" At first, the students in Slytherin were equally dumbfounded but they soon were grinning widely and puffing up their chests. Malfoy had a particularly irritating smirk on his face, Harry thought.

Ron muttered under his breath, "I can't believe it. Harry Potter! In Slytherin!"

Dumbledore raised his hand to restore quiet. "Harry?" Dumbledore looked behind him, toward a door in the corner behind the staff table, and gestured for someone to enter. Slowly, a young boy entered the Great Hall, to stand beside Dumbledore. He looked very scared and Harry couldn't blame him. It must be very intimidating to have everyone looking at you, Harry thought.

"This is Harry Potter," Dumbledore continued. "I am sure that you will all do your best to make Mr. Potter welcome. Harry, you may join your classmates at the Slytherin table." Harry thought he detected a note of strain in Dumbledore's voice as he mentioned Slytherin. So, your fair-haired boy is giving you worries already? Hah!

Jerkily, the false Harry walked to the Slytherin table and took a seat beside Draco Malfoy, who had quickly cleared a space for the boy to sit beside him. Harry mused cynically that Draco was happy enough to make friends with the famous Boy-Who-Lived, pureblood or not.

Dumbledore called for attention again. "As you are aware after their search of Hogwarts Express, our school is presently playing host to some of the Dementors of Azkaban, who are here on Ministry of Magic business. Please do not try to enter or exit Hogwarts without permission as they are guarding all entrances. They are not to be fooled by tricks or disguises, and it is not in their nature to respond to pleading or excuses. Do not give the Dementors a reason to harm you." Harry shuddered involuntarily.

Dumbledore ended his speech by introducing Professor Lupin, who was indeed the new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, and Hagrid, who had been appointed as the new Care of Magical Creatures teacher.

Harry was delighted to learn of Hagrid's new position. He knew how much being a teacher would mean to Hagrid. Harry felt a wave of satisfaction. He knew that it was due to him that Hagrid's name had been cleared. I have made a real difference in Hagrid's life, he thought. My mother was right. I am a hero. I defeated Tom Riddle last year and look what happened. I was born to defeat Voldemort; I know it!

By the time the feast drew to an end, Harry was practically weaving with exhaustion. He knew that Ron was hoping to speak with “Harry Potter” or, at least, catch a closer look at the boy, but Harry was too tired to care about his “twin” at the moment. Yawning loudly, he made his way up to Gryffindor Tower and promised himself that he would try to speak with the pretender the next day.

Chapter Eleven – Year Three; Hippogriffs, Boggarts and Dementors

Harry saw the imposter Harry in double Potions, which Gryffindor took with Slytherin. Harry shared a table with Ron in the back of the room. Draco Malfoy sat at his customary table, close to the front, with his new best friend, the fake Harry Potter. In his mind, Harry started calling the other boy “Harry 2”.

Draco was clearly thrilled to be with the famous Boy-Who-Lived. He looked around the room to make sure everyone noticed who was sitting next to him. When he caught Ron’s eye, he smirked.

Ron seemed to take it as a personal affront that Harry Potter was fraternizing with Malfoy. Ron told Harry that he had tried to speak with Harry 2 last night, when the real Harry had gone on to Gryffindor Tower seeking his bed. But, Crabbe and Goyle had blocked Ron’s attempts to approach the other boy. Ron told Harry that he was hoping to speak with “Harry” at the end of class. Harry nodded his head in agreement. He, too, wanted to meet the boy.

When Professor Snape entered the room, the class fell silent. He cast his cold, beady eyes over the classroom. “I am aware that you are excited over the appearance of our new...celebrity,” he began, coldly, “but I expect everyone to concentrate on learning in this class. You can gawk and ask for autographs later,” Snape sneered. “Unfortunately, you will find that Mr. Potter is far behind in his studies. Clearly fame is not everything.”

The class held its breath at this unprovoked attack. However, while Harry 2 glared at Snape, he said nothing.

Harry was taken aback at how cold and nasty Snape was when speaking about Harry 2. It was obvious that Snape and Harry 2 loathed each other. Had something happened between the two during the weeks Harry 2 had been at Hogwarts before the rest of the students had arrived? Or, did Snape hate Harry 2 because of his fame? Malfoy was fawning over Harry 2 because of who he was. Could Snape hate Harry 2 for the same reason? Or, was Snape a Voldemort supporter who hated Harry 2 because he thought the boy had defeated Voldemort?

Harry found himself feeling sorry for Harry 2 again. It couldn't be easy if his own Head of House didn't like him.

Harry's sympathy for the false Harry didn't last long as Harry 2 was unpleasant and rude. His attitude toward Harry and Ron, when they had approached him after their first Potions class, was typical of how he spoke with most of his classmates.

When the class ended, Ron jumped up from his seat and hurried over to Harry 2's desk, to corner the boy before he left the room. Draco narrowed his eyes at Ron's approach and started to walk out of the room. Harry 2 turned to follow Draco, but Ron stepped in front of him, forcing the other boy to stop.

"Hello. I'm Ron Weasley." He gave a wide smile in greeting.

"Yeah, I know," said the other boy. "Draco told me who you are." His tone was flat and unfriendly.

Pressing on, his smile only slightly dimmed, Ron said excitedly, "I've been hoping to meet you for a long time. Welcome to Hogwarts." He stuck out his hand for a shake.

"Thanks," the other boy said, shaking Ron's hand with a noticeable lack of enthusiasm.

Ron ignored the signs, and asked eagerly, "Would you like to study together some time? Or, play Quidditch, or do something?"

"No. I'm good," responded Harry 2 dismissively.

Ron's mouth hung open a bit, unsure how to react. Harry could feel his temper rising, but he forced himself to calm down and try to make whatever contact he could with the pretender. "I'm Mark Twist," he introduced himself. He didn't try to shake the other boy's hand.

Harry 2 inclined his head slightly. "Yeah. I've heard of you, too."

Harry could imagine just what stories Draco had told Harry 2 about him. He was sure that mudblood and parselmouth featured largely in the telling. Trying to establish some rapport with the other boy, Harry said, "Snape was out of line with his comments about you at the beginning of class."

"Yeah, well, he's an idiot," said Harry 2.

"You've got that right," said Ron with feeling. He smiled again, relieved to have found some common ground with his hero.

"We're going to Divination now," continued Harry. "Why don't we head there together?" he offered.

"I prefer to walk at my own pace," said Harry 2.

"We can walk fast or slow, whatever you want, Harry," said Ron, sycophantically.

Harry 2 cast Ron a look of disdain. "I prefer to walk alone or with the friends I select," he said bluntly, looking toward Draco who was lounging by the door of the classroom waiting for Harry 2 to join him.

"Oh," said Ron, blankly.

While Harry was irritated by Ron's star-struck behavior, he was angry at Harry 2 for rebuffing his friend. Striving to keep his temper in check, he said quietly, "Well, don't let us keep you then."

"I won't," retorted Harry 2 and he left them to join Draco.

Draco cast a triumphant sneer in Harry and Ron's direction as he turned to march down the corridor with Harry 2. The Gryffindors didn't say anything, but walked in silence to Divination.

Harry 2's unfriendly behavior caused some students to keep their distance. However, many continued to fawn over the famous boy.

While it was true that Snape didn't like the boy, that sentiment was obviously not shared by the rest of the school. Other teachers were clearly thrilled to have the boy in their class. Students vied for the chance to speak with him and he was rarely without a coterie of four or five students surrounding him. In a few weeks, the boy had thawed enough to start enjoying the attention and popularity.

Soon, Harry 2 could be seen holding court, with admirers at his beck and call. He would have them perform small errands, such as fetching him water or picking up something he had dropped. Harry was sure that the other boy even had some of the other students do his homework for him. Harry couldn't understand why the other students would be willing to let the pretender order them around. But, these students seemed thrilled every time they were given a task to perform. It was amazing, Harry thought to himself, to watch how Harry 2 was turning more and more into a tyrant each day.

Harry 2's behavior was particularly hurtful to Hagrid. Harry watched, frustrated, as Hagrid's overtures of friendship to the little faker were met with disinterest and contempt by that boy. Hagrid had known the Potters and was the one who had brought the baby Harry Potter to his relatives, he had admitted to Harry at tea one day. It was a huge disappointment to see that the boy had turned out to be such a jerk. Not that Hagrid would admit that "Harry" was a jerk. And, shocking to Harry, neither would Ron. Both Hagrid and Ron seemed determined to find excuses for their hero. Hagrid excused his behavior by saying that the poor boy had had a difficult time with his aunt and uncle and would warm up a bit once he knew that he was among friends. Ron said it was only natural that "Harry" would favor his own housemates and Ron lay the blame for the boy's unfriendly behavior at Draco's door.

Hagrid had tried to engage Harry 2 in class by asking him if he wanted to be the first to pet a Hippogriff, a cool half-bird half-horse creature that Hagrid had shown the students. It was clear that Hagrid considered this offer to be an ultimate treat.

Harry 2 cast a disdainful glance at the hippogriff and sneered. "I think not. I'm not fond of...half-breeds," he drawled.

It was exactly the kind of thing that Draco Malfoy might have said. Harry gazed at Harry 2 appraisingly. It was clear that the boy had chosen to buddy up with Draco. Was it just because Draco was his housemate? Cynically, Harry thought that Harry 2 had discovered, from Draco's own mouth, no doubt, that the Malfoy family was powerful in the wizarding world.

Seeing how hurt Hagrid was by Harry 2's comment, the real Harry stepped forward and pretended enthusiasm as he said, "Can I try, Hagrid? I think Hippogriffs are great."

Hagrid lit up at having someone share his enthusiasm for the animals. Gesturing to one, he said, "Why don't you try Buckbeak, here? Just remember that Hippogriffs are very proud creatures. You must never insult them."

Listening carefully to Hagrid's instructions, Harry approached Buckbeak, maintaining eye contact and bowing. The creature appeared to take a liking to Harry and soon Harry was petting him. Harry said loudly to the rest of the class, "Don't worry. You don't have to be afraid." He let his eyes linger on Harry 2, with the clear implication that he thought Harry 2 had refused to approach the Hippogriff because he was scared.

The other boy flushed in annoyance. "I'm not afraid," he said. He approached Buckbeak. "I'm just not interested in the ugly brute."

A flash of talons. Harry, standing close to the imposter, saw Buckbeak's attack out of the corner of his eye. Acting instinctively, he pushed Harry 2 out of the way. Unfortunately for him, Buckbeak couldn't stop the momentum of his attack and Harry felt the talons dig deep into his own shoulder.

As Harry fell to the ground, he saw Harry 2 scramble out of the way. Hagrid ran to the boys, grabbing at the chain around Buckbeak's neck to drag him back. A number of the girls screamed and general yells filled the air.

Harry drew a ragged breath. Pain blossomed from his shoulder and seemed to radiate throughout his body. Involuntarily, he groaned.

“Mark! You okay?” Ron was kneeling at his side, staring at him with round, worried eyes. When Harry struggled to rise, Ron put a hand behind Harry’s back in support. Slowly, Harry staggered to his feet.

Hagrid came running over, having secured Buckbeak in a paddock. The big man was white as a ghost. He scooped up Harry in his arms. “Put me down, Hagrid! I can walk!”

Hagrid ignored the boy’s protests. “Hermione! Open the gate!” Hermione ran to obey and Hagrid ran with Harry up to the castle. “I’m so sorry, Mark! Are ye okay?” Hagrid panted, as he ran.

Although in pain, Harry tried to reassure his friend. “It’s okay, Hagrid. I’ll be fine. Don’t worry. You can put me down.”

But, Hagrid carried Harry to the hospital wing. Harry found it embarrassing to pass students in the castle, who eyed him with frank curiosity as Hagrid ran. Harry tried not to notice the trail of blood that he was leaving in his wake.

Madam Pomfrey gasped when they arrived at the hospital wing. “My goodness! What did the boy do to himself?”

“It’s all me fault!” moaned Hagrid in remorse. “I was showing the class Hippogriffs and one up and attacked. I don’t know what got into Buckbeak.”

Madam Pomfrey had bared Harry’s shoulder as Hagrid spoke and was pressing some foul-smelling potion on Harry’s skin. “It wasn’t his fault, Hagrid.” Harry defended Buckbeak. “Potter didn’t listen to your lesson and he insulted Buckbeak, calling him ‘an ugly brute’.” The potion started to burn, taking Harry’s breath away. It made him dizzy and he fell back on the hospital bed he was sitting on.

“He’ll be okay, Poppy? Won’t he?” Hagrid was wringing his hands in worry.

“He’ll be fine, Hagrid. Just give the medicine a few minutes to work. He’ll be good as new in a few days. You’ll see.”

Hagrid stayed at Harry’s bedside until the burning sensation had disappeared. Harry’s shoulder was still stiff but, not wanting to worry Hagrid any more than he already was, Harry downplayed the pain. He insisted on being permitted to leave the hospital to rejoin his friends.

Madam Pomfrey sniffed in disapproval. “All right, Twist. I’ll let you go. But, you take it easy for the next few days and you come right back here if you notice any red streaks under the skin.”

Harry promised and, with his shoulder bandaged securely, he convinced Hagrid that he was well enough to go with him to the Great Hall, where lunch would be soon served.

Reluctantly, Hagrid left Harry with his fellow Gryffindors and made his way to the staff table. Harry smiled bravely at his friends and assured them that he was fine. Knowing that Hagrid’s eyes were on him throughout the meal, watching to make sure that he was doing okay, Harry pinned a false smile on his face and tried to remember not to wince when his shoulder gave a twinge.

Leaving the Great Hall after lunch, Harry was waylaid by Harry 2 and Draco. Tipping his head toward Harry’s shoulder, Harry 2 said, “So, I see they patched you up, Twist.”

Harry nodded but waited. Would Harry 2 thank him for having saved him from a mauling by Buckbeak?

“Hagrid should be sacked!” inserted Draco. “What was that great oaf thinking, showing us a dangerous creature like that? I’m going to tell my father.”

Harry’s temper exploded. “It was Potter’s fault! He should have listened to Hagrid’s instructions. Buckbeak wouldn’t have tried to hurt him then.”

“You would stick up for that buffoon,” Harry 2 sneered. “Well, you’re both misfits, so I guess it makes sense.” He started to walk away. Then, turning back to Harry, he said as if in an afterthought, “Anyway, thanks for pushing me out of the way. It was such a ... Gryffindor thing to do.” He made it sound as if Harry had been stupid to put himself in danger to protect someone else.

Hermione muttered under her breath as Draco and Harry 2 left the Great Hall, “What a git! He should have been grateful that you saved him.”

“Yeah. Too bad you didn’t let that Hippogriff take a bite out of his ego,” said Dean Thomas, coming up behind Harry.

That made Harry smile. “Next time, I’ll think about it,” he promised.

Ron kept quiet. Harry knew that Ron was having a hard time reconciling his image of the great Harry Potter with the behavior of Harry 2. Ron couldn’t defend his hero but it was too much to expect that he would criticize him either. Harry forgave Ron, though, as his friend spent the evening solicitously catering to Harry.

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The Hippogriff attack soon became a distant memory, to be replaced by more immediate concerns. Professor Lupin had brought a Boggart to the Defense Against the Arts class and Harry had failed miserably at repelling the creature.

The Boggart took on the shape of whatever frightened a person most. Harry, waiting his turn to confront the creature, imagined that it would turn into his Uncle Vernon. He thought fleetingly that it was lucky his uncle only called him “Boy”. If the Boggart Uncle Vernon called out to him before Harry could defeat him, it wouldn’t give away his identity.

However, the Boggart didn’t morph into Uncle Vernon, as expected. Taking over from Ron, whose Boggart had been a spider, Harry stepped forward bravely. The legless spider transformed into a

Dementor. The creature rose menacingly in front of Harry, who took an involuntary step backward.

“You’re doing fine, Mark,” called Professor Lupin in support. “You can do it. Remember. Concentrate!”

Harry tried desperately to remember the spell but his mind became foggy and unclear. In the distance, he heard his aunt screaming, “Get out of here!” His cousin Dudley was saying, “Don’t tell anyone we’re related!” Uncle Vernon’s sneers of “Freak!” echoed in his head.

Dimly, Harry was aware that Professor Lupin had stepped forward and had banished the Boggart. His legs weak, Harry sat heavily in a nearby chair. He avoided looking at his classmates, who were gazing at him sympathetically.

He felt a heavy hand on his shoulder and looked up at Professor Lupin. “It’s okay, Mark. A Dementor is a very scary creature.” Other students nodded their heads in agreement. “With practice, I’m sure that you’ll be able to handle a Boggart just fine.”

Harry nodded but didn’t say anything. He wasn’t concerned about Boggarts. He was really concerned about Dementors. He hated those creatures.

Unfortunately, Draco learned that Harry had not been able to defeat a Boggart and took pleasure in taunting the other boy. Harry would have loved to be able to tell Draco that he would have fared no better. But, Harry knew that the Slytherins had done well in their lesson with the Boggart.

Harry didn’t know what Draco’s Boggart was but the rumor spreading through Hogwarts was that Harry 2’s Boggart was a strange man pointing a finger at him and shouting, “I know who you are!” Everyone assumed that Potter was worried that Death Eaters would find him. After all, Sirius Black was still on the loose. Only the real Harry realized that it was the threat of being unmasked as a fake that frightened the little pretender.

Harry didn't make the mistake of pitying the other boy. It was clear that Harry 2 was enjoying his stolen identity. He didn't hesitate to join Draco in sneering at muggleborns and seemed to dislike "Mark Twist" in particular. It was a strange experience for Harry to realize that, far from being grateful to Harry for having saved him, Harry 2 seemed to resent him.

The real Harry wondered how long this other boy would be able to continue the pretense of being the real Harry Potter. Wouldn't someone discover the truth eventually? But, maybe whoever had driven the boy to run away wasn't even looking for him.

Harry sometimes mused that there were some downsides to being the focus of attention as Harry Potter. Sybil Trewlaney, the Divination teacher, routinely saw dark omens surrounding the boy and predicted his imminent death at least once a week. This annoyed the real Harry, but the false Harry didn't seem to mind. He also didn't seem to care that he wouldn't be permitted to join the other third years in visiting Hogsmeade. The boy didn't have permission from any guardian to go to the village and Professor Dumbledore thought it safer for the boy to remain at Hogwarts anyway, given that Sirius Black still had not been found.

On Halloween morning, the third years got ready for their first trip to Hogsmeade. Harry had been looking forward for weeks to going to the only all-wizard village in England. He had, of course, forged the signatures of his "parents" on the permission slip. Ron's brothers had told him of the treats in store at the village and he could barely wait for the day to arrive. However, Harry had not counted on passing Dementors who were guarding the Hogwarts gates.

Even though the Dementors had been given orders not to harm any of the students who were leaving the castle, Harry felt the effects of the Dementors almost immediately. As he approached the gate, to exit the castle grounds, Harry felt a deep cold start to penetrate his bones. "Mark, are you all right?" asked Hermione, worriedly. "You don't look so good."

Harry felt sweat break out on his face and his hands felt clammy. A distant voice started to sound in his ear, "You're a freak!"

He stopped in his tracks and swayed. "What's wrong with him?" he heard Ron ask.

"I think it's the Dementors," Hermione responded.

The voice in Harry's head became louder, "You should never have been born! No one will ever love you!"

He felt dizzy and he started to sway. With a groan, he sank to the ground and lost consciousness. When he came to, Harry was in a darkened room. Looking around blearily, he realized that he was lying in a hospital bed. He recalled what had happened. He sat up slowly, and, noticing him move, Madam Pomfrey approached.

She put a hand on his forehead, and smiled kindly. "Feeling better, Mr. Twist?" At his nod, she continued. "You gave your friends quite a scare. You'll be fine. As soon as you feel a bit steadier, you can return to your common room. I suggest you go to bed early tonight and get a good night's sleep."

"But what happened?"

"You are obviously particularly sensitive to Dementors. You fainted when you came near them. Your friends brought you to me. I convinced them that you'd be okay and I believe that they went on to Hogsmeade. After all, there was nothing more that they could do for you here."

At Harry's stricken expression, Madam Pomfrey sympathized. "I'm sorry you missed the trip to Hogsmeade. But, there'll be others."

Harry said nothing. His disappointment was too keen. He had wanted to go to Hogsmeade so much, he could taste it! And, he was still shaky from the effects of the Dementors. If he reacted like this to Dementors all the time, how could he ever leave the castle?

He returned to the Gryffindor common room where Ron and Hermione found him a short time later. They commiserated with their

friend over his not being able to go to Hogsmeade and they brought him a number of treats to soften the blow. Harry was grateful for their sympathy.

“You know what, Mark?” said Ron, munching on a Chocolate Frog he had purchased in Hogsmeade. “You should ask Professor Lupin whether there is any spell that you could learn to keep the Dementors away from you.”

“That’s a great idea,” said Hermione.

Harry turned this thought over in his head and agreed. He brightened with the possibility that there might be something he could do about the Dementors. “I’ll ask him tomorrow,” he vowed.

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Chapter Twelve – Year Three; Sirius Black

That night, the school was thrown into a panic when, after the Halloween feast, the killer Sirius Black tried to sneak into Gryffindor Tower. No one could understand how he had been able to enter Hogwarts. Luckily, however, he did not have the password and the Fat Lady in the portrait guarding the entrance to the Tower refused to admit him. In retaliation, he had slashed at the portrait and it hung in tatters. The poor Fat Lady had fled to other paintings for safety.

Dumbledore and the teachers searched Hogwarts but were unable to find Black. He had disappeared as mysteriously as he had been able to enter. The students all slept in the Great Hall, in sleeping bags Dumbledore had conjured for them.

Everyone assumed that Black had mistakenly believed Harry Potter had been sorted into Gryffindor and had been trying to break into Gryffindor Tower in order to kill the boy. To protect him, the Slytherin prefect was assigned to sleep next to Harry. Harry looked over at the boy before he crawled into his own sleeping bag. Was Harry paler than usual? Was he regretting having stolen the identity of the Boy-Who-Lived now? It wasn't all fun and games, Harry thought.

Harry noticed Crabbe and Goyle standing next to Harry, flexing their muscles and cracking their knuckles, as if to impress an absent Black with their strength. Harry doubted that Sirius Black would be impressed by two thirteen year-olds who barely knew what end of their wand to hold. Draco had his wand in his hand, as if expecting Black to jump out at them at any moment. He seemed very skittish. When the prefect came up behind him unexpectedly, he jumped a foot in the air.

Lights went out, and the students slowly dropped off to sleep. Harry, however, stayed awake well into the night, his wand gripped tightly in his own hand, hidden within his sleeping bag. He knew that everyone thought that Sirius Black had just made a mistake in targeting Gryffindor Tower. But, he worried that Sirius Black knew what he was doing. Perhaps, Black had some way of knowing that the other boy was a pretender and that he, the real Harry, was in Gryffindor. Was

he the real target, after all? When he finally fell asleep, his dreams were uneasy and he woke feeling unfreshed.

Dumbledore allowed the students to return to their dorms the next morning. While Harry still worried about Sirius Black, he realized that there wasn't anything he could do about that threat. He would have to hope that Dumbledore and the other teachers had strengthened the protections that would keep Black out of the school. On the other hand, the Dementors were something he could do something about. Or, at least, he hoped so.

So, the next day after class, Harry approached Professor Lupin to ask him to teach him how to protect himself against Dementors. Lupin agreed to try to teach the young boy the Patronus Charm, although he warned that it was a very difficult spell and many wizards couldn't master it. Worse yet, Lupin couldn't start lessons until after the Christmas break.

Harry borrowed some books from the library and focused on learning the theory behind the Patronus Charm and practicing the wand movement behind the spell. He hoped that, when Professor Lupin was able to teach him the charm, he would learn it more quickly if he had done some studying beforehand. Harry was determined to learn the spell and conquer his fear of the Dementors. They were ruining his life! The week before Christmas, there was another Hogsmeade scheduled trip but there was no way Harry could go past the Dementors to visit the village. He was as trapped in Hogwarts as any student without a pass.

Harry moped around Gryffindor Tower in the days before the trip, trying not to let his disappointment upset everyone else. However, he noticed that Fred and George glanced at him from time to time, and then commenced whispering furiously to each other.

The day of the Hogsmeade trip, Harry was sitting by himself in the Gryffindor common room, sadly trying to concentrate on one of his textbooks. Ron, Hermione, and his other friends had already left for Hogsmeade, promising to bring him back treats once more.

“Hey, Mark!” Fred snuck up behind him and slapped him on the back. Harry jumped and whirled around.

Fred and George were grinning at him widely. Looking at them suspiciously, Harry said, “Hi. How come you’re not at Hogsmeade?”

“We’ve come to give you a Christmas present before we go,” said Fred.

George nodded. “We owe you for saving Ginny last year.”

“And we decided that your need is greater than ours.”

Fred pulled an old piece of blank parchment from his cloak and touched it with his wand, saying, “I solemnly swear that I am up to no good.”

At once, a map of Hogwarts and grounds started to form on the parchment. Harry’s mouth dropped open as he saw tiny bubbles moving along the map, marking where everyone in Hogwarts was at that moment. Above the map, was written,

Messrs Moony, Wormtail, Padfoot and Prongs

Purveyors of Aids to Magical Mischief-Makers are proud to present

THE MARAUDER’S MAP

Fred pointed to passages that Harry had never known existed. He traced one with his finger and said, “This passage, here, goes right into Hogsmeade. There are seven in all, but Filch knows about these four.” He pointed them out. “This one is caved in and this one has the Whomping Willow over the entrance. But this one goes into the cellar at Honeydukes.”

“And you won’t have to go past any Dementors,” said George.

Harry blushed. He hated that everyone knew of his weakness.

Fred continued. "When you're done using it, just tap the map with your wand," he did so, demonstrating, "and say 'Mischief managed'." The map erased itself and the parchment became blank once more. He folded the map and handed to Harry, who took it reverently.

"Thank you!" Harry breathed. "It's fabulous!"

Fred and George nodded, satisfied with Harry's reaction. "See you in Honeydukes," said George, winking.

Harry immediately went to the third floor corridor to find the statue of the hunchbacked, one-eyed old witch. Reading the map, he saw the bubble, bearing the name "Mark Twist" tapping the witch and whispering "dissendium." He did the same and the hump opened wide enough for him to enter. He slid down a stone slide, into a passageway that led, after about an hour, to Honeydukes.

As Harry walked quickly through the tunnel, he had plenty of time to think. He was very excited about visiting Hogsmeade. He had been so disappointed last time to have missed the trip. While he had permission to be in the village, he would have to avoid any teachers or prefects. He didn't want them asking him how he had gotten there, when they knew that he wouldn't go past the Dementors. He didn't want anyone guessing that there was another exit out of Hogwarts. Not only didn't he want this passageway sealed or watched by Dementors, he didn't want anyone to learn about the existence of the Marauder's Map.

What a great gift! He couldn't wait to study it more closely. He was just lucky that the map hadn't realized his name was really Harry Potter. It was amazing how deep his magical concealment had seeped. The school admittance list had listed him as Mark Twist, owls looking for Harry Potter couldn't find him, and even this magical map didn't realize who he was.

Curious, Harry looked to see if there was an unfamiliar name in the Slytherin common room. Sure enough, there was a bubble with the name "Andrew Danirson". Ah ah! The imposter! Harry smiled slightly. He wasn't sure why, but he felt better knowing the name of the other boy. Harry mused to himself that Andrew didn't realize how lucky he

was that the twins had apparently never noticed that the map showed no bubble for “Harry Potter”. But, then, why would they look? The twins would have only been interested in making sure that the coast was clear whenever they were up to some prank.

By the time Harry arrived at Hogsmeade, he was frozen. The tunnel was quiet cold. He had forgotten to grab a warm cloak before setting off. He had been too excited to think clearly. Luckily, when Harry climbed out of the tunnel into the Honeydukes cellar, he was able to thaw out. He saw Hermione and Ron in the main shop and enjoyed watching their looks of amazement when they saw him.

They demanded to know how he had gotten there and, in whispers, he explained about the Marauder’s Map. Ron was annoyed that his brothers hadn’t thought to give him the map. Hermione had wanted him to turn it in to Professor McGonagall so that the teachers would be aware that there might be other entrances into Hogwarts that Sirius Black could use. Harry and Ron were able to convince her that this was not likely because Dementors were patrolling Hogsmeade every night. Not completely satisfied, Hermione agreed to keep quiet.

The three friends spent an enjoyable time in Honeydukes, with Ron and Hermione pointing out the various treats for Harry’s perusal. Since it was so cold outside, the friends decided to go next to The Three Broomsticks for a butterbeer. They took a table at the back of the room where Harry kept a sharp eye out for teachers. When Harry saw Professors McGonagall and Flitwick enter, followed by Hagrid and Cornelius Fudge, the Minister for Magic, he dove off his seat and ducked under the table.

Oh, no! Professor McGonagall would be sure to ask him how he had gotten into Hogsmeade, if she saw him. As his head of house, she knew that Harry wasn’t expecting to be in Hogsmeade because he wouldn’t go past the Dementors. Oh, well. If she did see him, he would say that he been able to go past them after all, and just hope that she didn’t check with Filch, who had been checking off which students had passed through the gates.

Worrying about being found, and thinking of an excuse in case he were discovered, Harry almost missed what the adults were

discussing. Madam Rosmerta, the proprietress of The Three Broomsticks, had been invited to join Fudge and the teachers. When Harry heard Madam Rosmerta mention the name Potter, he listened more carefully.

“Yes,” agreed Professor McGonagall. “It’s a shock that Lily and James’ son ended up in Slytherin.”

“I wish I could like the boy more,” said Professor Flitwick, honestly.

“What do you mean?” demanded Madam Rosmerta.

“Well, he’s not very polite and he seems very cold to the other students.”

Hagrid objected. “He’s had a tough life, he has. He’ll warm up.”

Cornelius Fudge chimed in. “It’s true, he did have a tough life. Worse than the papers reported.”

The other adults leaned forward to hear, and Fudge dropped his voice. Harry leaned forward too and held his breath. “You know that the Daily Prophet reported that Harry was abused by his relatives? They don’t know the half of it. We tried to cover it up, as much as we could or there was sure to have been muggle killings in response. But, that boy was seriously hurt by his aunt and uncle. It’s no wonder that he is stand-offish now. It’s a miracle he’s not a raving lunatic, the way they treated him.”

Hagrid started to cry. Professor McGonagall turned pale. Under his table, Harry let out a shaky breath himself. He didn’t want to remember his past. It made him feel sick inside.

Fudge continued. “And, now, the boy just can’t catch a break. What with Sirius Black after him.”

“Is it certain that Black is still after the boy?” asked Flitwick.

“Yes. He’s been spotted near here.”

McGonagall said sadly, "I can't believe that Sirius Black went over to the dark side. He and James Potter were like brothers."

Fudge nodded. "Yes, he was best man at James' marriage to Lily. He was Harry's godfather. Can you believe it? And, he's the one who told You-Know-Who where the Potters were hiding!"

Hagrid roared with rage. The other customers looked up in alarm and there was silence in the room. He was shushed by Fudge, Flitwick and McGonagall. After a few minutes, when it seemed that it was safe again, the other customers started talking.

"What happened?" Rosmerta asked the Minister, eager to hear more.

Fudge continued. "The Potters knew that You Know Who was after them. They used a Fidelius Charm to hide their whereabouts, and Sirius Black was the Secret-Keeper. There was no way You Know Who could have found them if Sirius Black hadn't served them up on a silver platter. He didn't realize, of course, that little Harry Potter would defeat You Know Who."

Hagrid moaned in his drink, "I met Black the night I collected Harry from Lily an' James' house. Jus' got him outta the ruins, poor little thing, with a great slash across his forehead, an' his parents dead...an' Sirius Black turns up, on that flyin' motorbike he used ter ride. He wanted to take the boy, sayin' he was his godfather. But, I told him no, because Dumbledore said the boy was to go ter his aunt and uncle's."

"Just think," mused Rosmerta. "If Black had been able to take Harry, the boy wouldn't have been placed with those awful relatives of his."

The others nodded their heads morosely. "In other circumstances, he could have petitioned for custody even though he wasn't formally named as guardian in a will," explained Fudge. "Since he was Harry's godfather, and a wizard, the Wizengamot might have awarded him

custody. Certainly, I don't think Harry's relatives would have fought to keep the boy."

"Why didn't the Potters name him as Harry's guardian in a will?" Flitwick wondered.

"James didn't want to admit the possibility that he and Lily could be killed. The arrogance of youth! We can't forget just how young he and Lily were when they ..." McGonagall's voice trailed away in sadness.

"As it turned out, it wouldn't have mattered," said Fudge. "With Black in Azkaban, Harry's guardianship would have reverted to his relatives anyway."

Hagrid, reminded of Sirius' treachery, thumped his ale on the table and muttered angrily, "And, I comforted the murderin' traitor!"

The other adults shook their heads in sympathy.

"But, Black was caught by the Ministry the day after the Potters were killed, wasn't he?" asked Rosmerta.

"Yes. When Black tried to escape, he was confronted by another friend. You remember Peter Pettigrew?"

"He was that dull little boy who was always tagging around after Potter, Black and Remus Lupin," McGonagall reminded Madam Rosmerta. "They called themselves the Marauders."

Harry gasped, and Ron kicked him.

"That's right," said Fudge. "Pettigrew corned Black. Black blew up the street, killing a dozen muggles and obliterating Pettigrew. Only a finger was left. And Black just stood there laughing. Black was taken away by twenty members of the Magical Law Enforcement Patrol. He's been in Azkaban ever since. That is, until he escaped," he said miserably.

"Is it true that he's mad?" asked Madam Rosmerta.

Fudge sighed. "I wish I could say he was. But, on my last visit to Azkaban, he made perfect sense. He asked whether he could have my newspaper, if I were finished reading it. It was astounding how little effect the Dementors seemed to have on him – and he was one of the most heavily guarded in the place, you know."

The adults were quiet for a while and then Professor McGonagall suggested that they head back to the castle. After they had left, and Madam Rosmerta had gone back to serving other patrons, Harry crawled back into his seat. He felt very shaky but neither Ron nor Hermione seemed to notice anything unusual. They were excited about what they had learned but they didn't realize that the story was personal to Harry.

Ron asked eagerly, "Do you think we should tell Harry Potter about this? Shouldn't he be told that Sirius Black was his godfather?"

"No!" said Harry sharply. When Ron looked at him in surprise, Harry made an effort to make his voice more casual. "Dumbledore or the Minister would have told him if they thought that was the right thing to do."

Hermione nodded in agreement. "Yes. If we told him, who knows if he would do something rash, like try to find Black on his own. I don't like him, but I don't want him to get hurt."

"Okay." Ron was disappointed. He would have liked an excuse to speak with his hero.

Harry bid goodbye to his friends and returned to Honeydukes to take the tunnel back to Hogwarts. The trip back passed in a fog to him. In his mind, he kept turning over and over the story he had heard about how Sirius Black had betrayed his parents. His godfather. Harry knew that being a godparent was considered an honor in the wizarding world. A godparent was responsible for ensuring that the child received a proper magical education in the event that the parents were unable to provide it. And, this was the man who was trying to kill Harry Potter now.

When he remembered that his father had been one of the Marauders, Harry closed his hand on the map in his robe. It gave him a warm thrill to know that his father had touched this parchment years ago. It felt as if, somehow, through the years, his father was speaking to him. It seemed to him to be fate that he, the son of one of the Marauders, had come into possession of the map. He tried not to think that Sirius Black had also had a hand in creating the magical object.

Harry returned to Gryffindor Tower in a haze. He skipped dinner, not wanting to listen to Ron or Hermione talk about the tale they had heard. He pretended that he had gotten a chill during his walk in Hogsmeade and said he wanted to go to bed early. But, he lay in his bed for hours, staring at the ceiling in the darkness. He didn't answer when his roommates came into the room, letting them think that he had already fallen asleep. And, during the night, when he started to cry, he muffled his cries in his pillow.

The next few weeks were very difficult for Harry. No one knew why he was suddenly so quiet and rarely smiled. He found it hard to sleep and harder still to concentrate in class. He received disappointed looks from his teachers on his lack of attention and was given extra homework by Professors McGonagall and Flitwick. He infuriated Professor Snape by misreading the directions on the board to brew a potion to cure warts. Most students would have received no more than a scathing comment for having made such a mistake. But, Snape had come to expect competent work from Mark Twist and was not inclined to accept a substandard effort. So, Harry received his first detention and spent two hours on a sunny Saturday inside the dungeon cleaning cauldrons.

Christmas break helped Harry regain some of his former spirits. While both Ron and Hermione had gone home over break, Harry received holiday gifts from both. He also enjoyed the holiday feast in the Great Hall, with Dumbledore and the other staff who remained at Hogwarts over break. Harry 2 was there as well, but Harry sat far away from him. The two exchanged looks of dislike from across the table from time to time, but didn't exchange any conversation.

Harry found it oddly enjoyable to watch Dumbledore watching Harry 2. Harry could tell that Dumbledore was worried about Harry 2's behavior. The boy had been rude to Professor Sprout, had grabbed the food without offering it to anyone else, and had insisted that a first year change seats with him, so that the Boy-Who-Lived could have a seat without the sun shining in his eyes. The headmaster forced a smile and offered crackers to the boy, which the little pretender took without thanking him. The real Harry could tell that there was a strain of worry behind the twinkle in the headmaster's eyes.

Harry knew it was a petty revenge, but he felt that Dumbledore deserved to have found a Harry Potter that didn't fit his precious plans for a golden hero. Let him suffer, Harry thought. The headmaster had left Harry at the Dursleys because of the blood protection. He didn't make sure that the boy was being well cared for. All Dumbledore cared about was making sure that the prophesized vanquisher of Voldemort lived to fight another day. Let Dumbledore worry that Harry Potter was really a big prat. He, the real Harry Potter would someday defeat Voldemort. He was, after all, born to be a hero. But, in the meantime, let Dumbledore worry a bit. He deserved it.

After break, Harry started doing better in classes and both Ron and Hermione commented that the break seemed to have done him well. Hermione was actually looking more strained than Harry. Both Ron and Harry thought she had over-extended herself with the number of classes she was taking. They couldn't understand how she managed to attend all of her classes, since a number of them had overlapping schedules.

Unfortunately, Ron and Hermione had a serious falling out when Hermione's cat Crookshanks apparently ate Ron's rat, Scabbers. The only thing left of the rat was some hair and some blood on Ron's sheets. Hermione defended her cat, claiming that there was no proof Crookshanks had eaten the rat. Ron was furious with Hermione, since he thought she hadn't done enough to keep her cat away from Scabbers. The two stopped speaking to each other and Harry felt pulled between the two.

Harry was relieved when his lessons with Professor Lupin started and he was able to avoid having to choose which friend to sit with in the Gryffindor common room. Most nights, Harry spent learning the Patronus Charm with the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, or practicing by himself in an empty classroom what he had learned in a previous lesson. Professor Lupin used a Boggart, which took on the shape of a Dementor, to help Harry learn the charm. The young boy had not been able to produce a full-bodied patronus, but he had managed a silvery cloud that helped muffle the effects of the Dementors.

Harry was impatient with himself but Professor Lupin told him that he should be impressed with what he had been able to accomplish. Even a shadowy patronus was difficult to conjure. But Harry pushed himself harder and harder to conquer the spell. Now that he understood the basics, and could conjure a shadowy patronus, he was sure that he would be able to produce a corporeal patronus if he just tried harder. So, he spent many nights working until curfew, practicing the charm.

One such night, Harry fell into bed exhausted after having practiced the Patronus Charm for hours. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow. He was awakened by a yell from Ron, "AARRGGHH! NOOOO!"

Harry jumped out of bed, with the wand it was his custom to keep under his pillow already in his hand. "What's the matter? What happened?" he asked urgently.

Ron was sitting up in bed, looking terrified. He pointed at the far door. "Black! Sirius Black! With a knife!"

Harry felt as if he had been doused with cold water. He felt the blood drain from his face. He heard, as if from a distance, Dean asking, "You sure you weren't dreaming, Ron?"

"Look at the curtains! He slashed them with his knife. I tell you, he was here!"

Seamus ran to fetch Professor McGonagall. By this time, Ron and the rest of the Gryffindor House, now wide awake, were waiting in the common room. "Why are you all awake?" she demanded angrily, entering through the portrait hole. "Percy, I expected better of you!"

Percy, the prefect, defended himself. "I didn't authorize this, Professor! My brother had a nightmare..."

Ron yelled, "It wasn't a nightmare! Professor, I woke up and Sirius Black was standing over me, holding a knife!"

"That, that can't be," sputtered Professor McGonagall. "How could he get in?"

"Ask him!" said Ron, pointing at Sir Cadogan, the portrait who was substituting for the Fat Lady while she was being repaired. When pressed, Sir Cadogan cheerfully admitted that he had let a man enter Gryffindor Tower. He had had the password and Sir Cadogan had willingly let the killer pass. Neville Longbottom was in disgrace when he admitted that he was the culprit who had written down the week's passwords on a paper that had somehow ended up in the hands of Sirius Black.

When Professor McGonagall left to alert Dumbledore that Sirius Black had entered the castle again, Hermione threw herself at Ron to give him a hug. "You could have been killed!" she squeaked. Ron awkwardly patted her back.

"It's okay, Hermione. I'm fine."

"Ron! You could have been killed and I wouldn't have gotten a chance to tell you how sorry I am about Scabbers," she cried.

Ron was relieved when Hermione let him go. "Oh, well -- he was old. You never know. My parents might get me an owl now."

Hermione smiled weakly at him and they both turned to speak with other students, as other Gryffindors begged Ron to tell them what had happened.

Harry stood quietly off to the side of the room. He was glad that the incident had healed the rift between his friends. But, he was having a hard time concentrating on anything other than the fact that Sirius Black had entered Gryffindor Tower. Had Black discovered that Mark Twist was Harry Potter? Or, was the killer looking for the fake Harry Potter, who was even now probably sleeping peacefully in Slytherin House? What should he do? Should he admit to Dumbledore that he was the real Harry Potter?

No, he thought to himself. What good would that do? Dumbledore couldn't seem to keep Black out of Hogwarts even thinking that the real Harry Potter was here. What would be different if Dumbledore knew that Mark Twist was the real Boy-Who-Lived? At most, he'd have teachers following him around. He didn't want that. And, once he admitted who he was, that was it. Never again could he be incognito. He would be the target of any supporter of the Dark Lord, not just Sirius Black.

No, he would say nothing. Having decided this, Harry joined the group of students surrounding Ron and listened with the others as Ron recounted once more how he had awoken to find Sirius Black hovering over him.

The next day, the school was once again in panic mode. Students talked of little else. Time and time again, Harry listened to conversations in which the principal theme was how lucky it was that Sirius Black still didn't realize that Harry Potter was not in Gryffindor. But, was that true? Harry kept turning the question over in his head.

The Boy-Who-Lived was being treated with more care than ever before. Teachers walked him from class to class. While he looked a little strained with worry, Harry 2 seemed to enjoy the extra attention. He certainly was more bossy than ever.

Ron received his share of attention too. He enjoyed telling the story of Sirius Black standing over him, knife in hand. Harry noticed in amusement that Ron embellished the story with each telling.

Harry had been worried that the next Hogsmeade trip would be cancelled because of Sirius Black. But, luckily, Dumbledore appeared to believe that the only threat was to Harry Potter, who wasn't visiting Hogsmeade anyway. So, with wand gripped tightly in his hand, Harry prepared to pass the Dementors guarding the gates of Hogwarts for the final Hogsmeade visit of the year. As he approached the gates, Harry felt the familiar chill start to grip him. He muttered, "Expecto patronum," and a small, silvery cloud formed in front of him, pushing the cold away.

The Dementor closest to Harry fell back. Harry gained more confidence and his shimmering patronus seemed to become a bit more solid, although he still couldn't tell its shape. Another Dementor fell back. Ron patted him on the back, in congratulations. "Well done, Mark!"

Hermione was impressed. "That was really something. Maybe you can teach me that some time?"

Harry smiled. He could see that some of the other students were looking in his direction, impressed. He had now passed safely by the Dementors, so he lowered his wand and his patronus winked out of sight. He felt a weight lift from his shoulders. Knowing that he had a weapon against the Dementors was empowering. He would keep practicing to make the charm stronger and stronger. Someday, he would be able to cast a corporeal patronus, he promised himself.

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Chapter Thirteen – Year Three; The Rat

The year started to wind to a close. With the last Hogsmeade weekend over, the students buckled down to study hard for their final exams. Harry was not worried about any of his subjects except Divination. He was one of the most studious in his year and he expected that he would receive high marks in all his subjects, except one. Unfortunately, he had never understood Divination and studying harder didn't seem to make much difference. The crystal ball had always remained mysteriously fogged for him. Tarot cards, palm readings and tea readings all held no answers. He enjoyed the class only because Ron was in it with him, and could always make him laugh about Professor Trewlaney's behavior. But, that wouldn't help for the final exam.

With some trepidation, Harry took his turn in the examination room. The students had entered one by one to meet privately with Professor Trewlaney. When they were finished, they had exited out of a different door, so that the students who had yet to take the test had no idea what questions the teacher would ask. As it turned out, the test wasn't so bad. When it came time to read the crystal ball, Harry just made up a story about Harry Potter coming to a sticky end. Professor Trewlaney was pleased, as he had suspected she would be. For some reason, the teacher seemed to thrive on predictions of doom and disaster.

"That was fine, Mr. Twist," assured Professor Trewlaney, scratching notes on a tablet. "That's all. You can leave through that door and I'll go get the next student."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry politely.

He turned to leave the room, when, suddenly, Professor Trewlaney stiffened and her eyes became unfocused. Harry cast her a look of alarm. Her eyes started to roll back in her head and Harry wondered if he should run to get Madam Pomfrey. "Professor Trewalaney? Are you okay?" he asked urgently.

She didn't answer. Instead, a harsh voice, completely unlike her usual breathy tones, issued from the woman's mouth. "It will happen tonight. The Dark Lord lies alone and friendless, abandoned by his followers. His servant has been chained these twelve years. Tonight, before midnight, the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever before. Tonight...before midnight...the servant...will set out...to rejoin...his master..."

Her voice trailed away. Then, like a dog throwing off water, Professor Trewlaney shook her head and came out of her daze. She noticed Harry staring at her fixedly and smiled pleasantly. "Is anything wrong, dear?"

Slowly, Harry shook his head and, in a shaky voice, muttered, "No. Nothing." Backing away, he fled the room.

Harry's head was in a whirl. Should he tell anyone what he had just heard? Was it a real prediction? He had never taken Professor Trewlaney seriously before. But, this was so different from her usual ethereal silliness. If it was a true prediction, what did it mean? "The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid." Was Sirius Black the servant? How could Harry do anything to prevent this?

Harry was very quiet at lunch, as he wondered what he should do about Trewlaney's odd behavior. Ron assumed that Harry had done poorly in the Divination examination, and commiserated with his friend.

"At least you know you aced the Defense Against the Dark Arts exam," Ron said bracingly. "And I'm sure you did fine in the other classes as well. Don't worry about Trewlaney."

Harry nodded and smiled weakly. "You're right. I wish I had quit the class like Hermione."

Hermione overheard. "That's about the only smart thing I did this year. I definitely took too many classes. Next year, I'm scaling back."

“I never could understand how you are able to get to all those classes,” Harry said.

“It wasn’t easy,” she replied. She played with a chain on her neck; whatever was on the necklace was hidden beneath her cloak.

“What’s that?” asked Ron, gesturing toward the necklace.

Hermione started, and realizing that she had been playing with the chain, dropped her hand as if burned. “Nothing!” she said a bit sharply. Harry and Ron looked at her curiously. “It’s just...something I borrowed and I’m going to return it. Today.”

Ron shrugged, losing interest in the conversation. Harry watched Ron dig into his second helping of dessert. Harry had no appetite himself and felt a bit nauseous. Finally, needing to do something, he said, “I’m exhausted. I’m heading back to the room to take a nap. I was up late studying, and it’s starting to catch up with me.” Ron waved a fork at Harry in a gesture of farewell, as his mouth was too full of treacle tart to reply.

Harry returned to his room and pulled the Marauder’s Map from his trunk. He stretched out on his bed, studying the map closely. He couldn’t see any dot on the map to indicate that Sirius Black was at Hogwarts. That was a relief, at least.

Harry was about to put the map away, and put Trewlaney’s prediction (if that’s what it was) out of his mind, when he noticed a bubble on the map moving in Hagrid’s hut. That was odd. Harry knew that Hagrid was currently in a clearing near the Forbidden Forest, giving his final exam to the Hufflepuffs. As Harry had left the Great Hall after lunch, he had overheard Susan Bones, a Hufflepuff student, say that she was on her way to her Care of Magical Creatures exam.

Looking more closely at the dot, Harry let out a gasp and gripped the parchment so tightly, it was in danger of ripping. He sat up straight and pushed his face so closely to the map, his nose was almost touching it. He was not imagining it. The dot read “Peter Pettigrew.”

How could that be? Peter Pettigrew was dead, killed by Sirius Black a dozen years ago. But, if that dot wasn't Peter Pettigrew, who was it? The map wasn't infallible. It showed him, Harry, as Mark Twist. Perhaps, someone else had stolen Pettigrew's identity, and the dot was the thief.

Scrambling off his bed, Harry bolted from the room and ran through the castle, ignoring calls from his friends who saw him passing. Harry ran to Hagrid's hut and stopped, panting, outside. Catching his breath, he pressed his ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything. Feeling very guilty, Harry slowly opened the door, which was unlocked.

There was no one there. Harry felt a wave of disappointment. He didn't know what he expected to find, but he had been so geared up to find something, it was a letdown to see the empty room. He glanced at the scrunched up parchment in his hand, and looked back at the diagram of Hagrid's hut, expecting to see that the bubble had disappeared. But, no. It was still there! And, it still said Peter Pettigrew.

Harry's heart started beating faster. Instinctively, he crept across the room, trying to be as silent as possible. Following the map, he moved closer to the location of the dot labeled Peter Pettigrew. Finally, he was in front of a cupboard and the dot was supposedly right in front of him. Suddenly, Harry heard a slight scratching noise and his eyes were pulled to a milk jar on the second shelf. Taking out his wand, Harry reached for the jar very slowly. He pulled it down and looked inside. He almost dropped it in his surprise.

"Scabbers!" he yelled. There was Ron's rat. It had lost a lot of weight and its hair had fallen out in clumps, but it was definitely Ron's pet.

"What are you doing here?" Harry smiled, and reached inside the jar to pet the rat. Ron would be so pleased that his rat hadn't been eaten by Crookshanks after all.

Then, Harry froze. Wait a minute. The Marauder's Map had said that the dot was Peter Pettigrew. What was going on?

Before Harry could gather his thoughts to try to make sense out of what was happening, he heard Fang bark in the distance. The exam must be over and Hagrid was returning to the hut. Stuffing the Marauder's Map inside his cloak, and grabbing the milk jug with Scabbers still inside, Harry left the hut before Hagrid could see him. Harry felt Scabbers start to scramble inside the jug and, to stop him from escaping, cast a spell to keep the rat from being able to get out of the jar.

Harry headed back to the castle, peering into the jar from time to time as he walked. He was oblivious to his surroundings and was completely unprepared when a large object crashed into him, just as he was nearing the Whomping Willow.

"Ow!" He fell heavily to the ground, and the jar holding Scabbers went flying.

He scrambled to his feet quickly and saw a big black dog bounding toward the jar. Harry realized that he had just been tackled by the dog, which was obviously after the jar. When it reached the milk jug, it grabbed the jar in its mouth and started running toward the Whomping Willow.

"Hey!" Harry yelled. "Give that back!" And, without thinking, Harry ran after the dog.

The dog slipped into an opening at the base of the tree. The tree started to creak ominously, and Harry knew that it would soon start thrashing its heavy branches. Before the branches could gain their momentum, Harry dived into the opening, following the dog. He found himself in a tunnel, whose entrance the Whomping Willow had hidden. Up ahead, he could hear the dog swiftly moving along.

Grabbing his wand tightly, Harry rushed after the dog. He had to stoop and turn sideways, from time to time, as the tunnel was very narrow. He felt as if the tunnel went on forever and he was just thinking over the wisdom of following the dog when, finally, the tunnel slanted upwards, and he came to a small opening. Slowly peering

over the edge of the opening, Harry saw that he was in a deserted room. He edged forwards and looked around. The windows were boarded up and furniture pieces were strewn around. A memory teased at the edges of his mind and he realized, with surprise, that he was in the Shrieking Shack, the abandoned property outside Hogsmeade that was rumored to be the most haunted dwelling in Britain.

A creak sounded above him and Harry slowly climbed the stairs to the next level. Pushing open the door of the room at the top of the landing, Harry slowly crept inside. He saw the dog in the corner of the room, with the jar next to him. With a growl, the dog slowly transformed into a man. An animagus! Standing in front of Harry was the notorious killer, Sirius Black. Long, filthy, hair hung down the man's back. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked like he hadn't eaten in days. He was grinning at Harry, with a slightly maniacal look.

Harry felt rooted to the spot, his voice deserting him. His wand was still gripped in his hand, but he couldn't remember the incantation for any spell he had ever known. He gazed at Sirius Black as if hypnotized. He had been right after all. Somehow, Sirius Black had penetrated his disguise and knew he was Harry Potter. Obviously, Black was going to kill him now. Harry was in such shock, he wasn't even frightened.

Black stepped close to Harry and wrestled the wand out of Harry's hand. The action woke Harry from his stupor. As Black turned away from Harry, clutching Harry's wand, Harry remembered that Sirius Black had been his father's best friend. He was the traitor who had betrayed the Potters to Voldemort. Without warning, Harry flung himself at Black, screaming, "You killed them! You killed them! Traitor!"

He took the older man by surprise, knocking him off-balance. The boy hit at Black with all of his strength, striking wherever he could land a blow. Black grunted with pain. "Impedimenta!" he gasped.

Suddenly, Harry felt as if an invisible hand were holding him in place. Black shoved the boy and Harry felt himself fall backward. He couldn't brace himself but, luckily, Black had shoved him in the

direction of a bed in the corner of the room. Harry landed with a thump.

“Stay there, boy!” demanded Black. “I don’t want to hurt you. But, I’ve waited too long...”

Harry struggled against his invisible bonds. Black picked up the jar and peered inside. “Hello, Peter. Long time no see. It’s always a pleasure to see old friends.”

Harry stopped struggling. He remembered the dot on the Marauder’s Map with the label Peter Pettigrew. Now, Black was speaking to Scabbers and calling him Peter. What could this mean? And, did Black know he was Harry Potter after all? He had said he didn’t want to hurt him. But, didn’t Black intend to kill him?

Harry watched Sirius Black intently. Feeling the boy’s eyes him, Black looked back at Harry. The convict grinned again. “I have finally found him,” Black crowed. Harry shivered. Looking into the jar again, Black said, “Are you ready to die, Peter?”

And, with a wave of Harry’s wand, Black muttered an incantation and, with a flash of light, the rat was silhouetted for a brief moment. Then, Scabbers transformed slowly into a short, balding man, with small eyes. Another animagus!

Ignoring the boy in the corner, who sat frozen in shock, both men faced each other. “Sirius,...” quivered the former rat, “...my old friend.”

Black growled. “Do you have any last words before I kill you, Peter?”

Peter let out a cry of distress and fell to his knees. “Don’t kill me, Sirius! I didn’t want Lily and James to die. What could I do? The Dark Lord was gaining more and more power. I was scared, Sirius. I was never brave like you and Remus and James. I never meant it to happen...He Who Must Not Be Named forced me...”

“Don’t lie!” screamed Black. “You were his spy!”

Pettigrew groveled. "What was there to be gained by refusing him? He was taking over everywhere?"

"What was there to be gained by fighting the most evil wizard who has ever existed? Only innocent lives, Peter!"

In the corner, unnoticed by the adults, Harry listened to the men arguing. So, it was Pettigrew who had betrayed his parents! Sirius Black had been framed.

"It wasn't my fault," whimpered Pettigrew.

"No, it was mine," Black admitted. Harry's head jerked to look back at Black. What did he mean? "I should never have convinced James to use you as Secret-Keeper instead of me. I never suspected that you were capable of such treachery. You sacrificed James and Lily, and you would have sacrificed Harry, too, in order to save your pathetic skin. Then, you killed that street full of muggles to frame me for your death. Cutting off your finger to convince people that you had died in that explosion was brilliant, Peter. I have to hand it to you. But, it was also your downfall. It was your missing finger that made me recognize you, in your animagus form. I saw the picture of you in the Daily Prophet with your wizard family, when they won that lottery. I knew that you were heading back to Hogwarts and I escaped Azkaban to find you."

"How...how..." Pettigrew gasped.

"You're not the only one who can use the animagus form to advantage, 'Wormtail'," taunted Black.

Harry started at the name. He had forgotten that Black, Pettigrew, Lupin and his father were the four Marauders who had created his magical map. Now, he realized that Pettigrew was Wormtail and, remembering Black's dog animagus, he suspected that Black was "Padfoot". He wondered whether his father was 'Moony' or 'Prongs'. Had his father also been an animagus? Did his animagus shape relate to his nickname?

Sirius continued his explanation, "I was able to survive Azkaban by transforming into a dog. The Dementors didn't affect me as much in my animal form. And, knowing I was innocent wasn't a happy memory, so they couldn't leach that away from me. I lost enough weight that, as a dog, I was able to slip through the bars at Azkaban, and then swim ashore. I've been searching for you ever since."

Harry rose slowly from the bed. The Impedimenta jinx had worn off and he could move freely. Not wanting to startle Black, Harry softly called his name. "Mr. Black. Sir."

The other man turned in surprise. He looked at Harry in puzzlement, as if he had forgotten that there was another person present in the room.

Harry gulped. "Er...Before you kill Pettigrew, may I just make a suggestion?"

"Yes, yes," said Pettigrew eagerly, still on his knees on the floor, with his hands intertwined as if in prayer.

Black nodded jerkily. Harry continued, "If you want to prove your innocence, why not take Pettigrew up to the castle now? Let him face trial."

Black looked at Harry, consideringly. Slowly, he spoke, "I don't trust the Ministry. They threw me in Azkaban without a trial. I've been waiting for 12 years to kill Pettigrew. I'm not sure I can wait any longer."

"You are Harry Potter's godfather. If you clear your name, you will be able to return to the wizarding world and, maybe...he can live with you." Harry's voice broke, but Black was too distracted by his own thoughts to notice.

"Would he want to, do you think?" His voice sounded doubtful, but with a twinge of hope.

“Yes,” said Harry, with assurance. “I think he’d want to. Very much.”

Pettigrew had been looking back and forth between Harry and Black, holding his breath. When Black lowered his wand, Pettigrew let out a breath of relief. “Thank you, dear boy,” he groveled.

Harry ignored him. “All right,” said Black. “We’ll go to the castle together. We’ll take you to Dumbledore. I want to kill Peter myself, but I can live with his being sent to Azkaban to face the Dementors as I was forced to do. I hope you receive the Dementor’s Kiss,” he told Pettigrew, maliciously.

Pettigrew shuddered but seemed to realize that it was prudent to keep quiet. Bound between Black and Harry, the three wizards went back through the tunnel, heading towards Hogwarts grounds.

Harry could barely contain his emotions. He was feet away from the man who had betrayed his parents. He itched to punch the sniveling little coward. But, he was also standing next to his godfather. Someone who would care for him. Someone who could, perhaps, love him. It would be worth discarding his disguise and claiming his identity as Harry Potter. Harry 2 would have to move over!

The trio exited the Whomping Willow and started on their trek to the castle. Suddenly, a cold chill started to fill the air. Black stopped short and Pettigrew almost bumped into him. Harry lifted his head, trying to catch the scent in the air. And then it hit him. Dementors!

Black started to moan deep in his throat. Dozens of dementors were filling the air, circling overhead. In their distraction, neither Black nor Harry paid attention to Pettigrew. Without warning, Pettigrew transformed into his rat animagus and slid through the chains binding him to his captors. Before they could stop him, Pettigrew had scurried away, his tail whipping out of sight.

“No!” Black cried, taking a step in Pettigrew’s direction. But, the Dementors started to swoop down and soon Black had collapsed on the ground.

Harry dashed forward and pulled his wand from Black's unconscious grip. Spinning to face the Dementors, he shouted, "Expecto Patronum!" Harry had never felt as powerful. It was as if a force from deep inside him was hungering to escape. He was going to live with his godfather! He just needed to prove Sirius was innocent. Nothing was going to stop him!

A huge stag leapt from Harry's wand, casting a bright silver glow over the area. The Dementors fell back as the stag circled the spot where Harry and Sirius were. Looking at the beautiful stag, Harry whispered, "Prongs," recalling the nickname of one of the Marauders. It couldn't be a coincidence. His father must have been a stag animagus and, now, it was Harry's Patronus. Harry felt a surge of emotion looking at the stag. It felt as if his father were there, protecting him.

Within moments, the air grew warm again, and Sirius stirred. The Dementors had fled and the Patronus winked out of sight. "Dad!" Harry cried, calling it back. But, it was gone. A hollow pit formed in Harry's stomach.

After a moment, Sirius opened his eyes and groggily sat up. "What happened?"

"The Dementors came," Harry said. Sirius looked up in alarm. "Don't worry. I was able to drive them off."

Sirius turned his eyes to the teenager. "Alone?" He sounded impressed. Harry nodded.

"But, Pettigrew escaped," said the boy, bitterly.

"No!" Sirius looked wildly around, as if expecting to see Pettigrew still lurking.

In the distance, they heard shouts from the direction of Hogwarts. Sirius scrambled to his feet. "I'd better go," he said. "They'll never believe I'm innocent now that Pettigrew has escaped."

"Wait! I'll tell them that I saw Pettigrew! Please, don't go!"

Sirius smiled grimly. "They'll never believe a boy. They'll think I 'confunded' you. Pettigrew has won again." And, without another word, the man transformed into a dog and bounded out of sight.

Harry stared in loss at the spot where Sirius had disappeared from view. He was gone! And, he didn't even know that Harry was...well, Harry. Disappointment threatened to overwhelm him.

"Twist!" Harry turned to see Professor Snape approaching, wand in hand. Behind him, a number of other teachers were trailing. "What happened? We saw Dementors circling."

Harry told the truth without thinking about its wisdom. "They were trying to capture Sirius Black, but I used the Patronus Charm to make them go away."

"Sirius Black!" gasped Professor McGonagall, who had reached the boy.

Harry nodded solemnly. "Well, where is he?" demanded Snape.

"He escaped," said Harry, dully.

"You mean that the Dementors had him cornered and, because of you, Black was able to escape?" said Snape slowly.

Harry finally realized that his actions could be misconstrued very dangerously. He rushed to explain. "Black is innocent! I saw Peter Pettigrew. Peter was the real traitor! He was hiding as an animagus all this time – he's a rat. Scabbers! Ron Weasley's pet rat."

The teachers were staring in amazement at Harry. It was clear that they thought Harry had lost his senses. After a moment, Professor Sprout muttered under her breath, "Confunded!"

Harry saw slight nods of agreement from a number of the other teachers. Snape was just looking at him through narrowed eyes. "No!

I'm not confunded! It's the truth. Sirius Black really is innocent and Peter Pettigrew is alive!"

"Let's get you back inside, Twist," said Professor McGonagall. "I think that Madam Pomfrey should take a look at you."

And, ignoring Harry's protests that he was fine, he was marched back to the castle, to the hospital wing. Later, when Harry was visited briefly by Professor Dumbledore, he found that the headmaster seemed no more inclined to believe him than the other teachers. Dumbledore was, perhaps, more diplomatic in his approach, but it was clear that no one gave Harry's tale much credence.

Even Harry's friends dismissed his story out of hand. Hermione looked skeptical but held her tongue with great effort.

Ron was more forthright about his opinion. "Are you mental? Scabbers was not an animagus. I think I would know if my own rat was really a man! It's clear he confunded you, Mark. It's just a shame that you drove away the Dementors. It's not your fault because you weren't in your right head. But, it's too bad he got away again."

"He's innocent, Ron!" insisted Harry.

Ron rolled his eyes. "Yeah. That's why he tried to kill me in my bed, when he snuck into Gryffindor Tower looking for Harry Potter."

"He wasn't looking for Potter. He was looking for Scabbers!"

Ron shook his head in disbelief and refused to discuss it further.

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The next day, Harry found that the other students fell silent as he walked by. Conversations were shushed abruptly when he entered a room. It reminded him of his second year when many had considered that he might be the Heir of Slytherin. Now, everyone was talking about how Mark Twist had helped Sirius Black escape from Dementors.

At lunch, Harry sat quietly and Ron and Hermione, on either side of him, said little as well. When Harry left the Great Hall, Harry 2 and Draco Malfoy followed him into the corridor. "Twist!" called out Draco.

Harry turned slowly to face the boys. "We heard that you let Sirius Black go," said Draco.

"He was innocent," said Harry.

Draco ignored this. "I can't believe that you let him escape."

A few students started to gather around the boys to listen, forming a semi-circle. Harry saw Ron and Hermione out of the corner of his eyes. Harry stood straighter and lifted his chin. "I have explained. Sirius Black is innocent."

"You know that Sirius Black has been trying to kill me and you let him go," said Harry 2. "I hear that you speak parseltongue. And now, you help one of You-Know-Who's supporters go free. Are you a Dark Wizard, Twist?"

The watching crowd muttered and shifted uneasily.

Harry was silent for a moment and then spoke quietly. "You know I am not a Dark Wizard. You are trying to turn people against me. For what reason? Is it just because I am muggleborn?"

Harry 2 laughed awkwardly. "I don't know what you mean. You are the one who let that Death-Eater go. Do you want him to kill me? Is it because I'm Harry Potter?"

Harry stared straight into Harry 2's eyes and said softly, "You are not Harry Potter."

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Chapter Fourteen – Third Year; Harry Potter Lost

At Mark Twist's incredible challenge that Harry Potter was a fake, the crowd gasped, and Harry 2 froze. "What did you say?" he whispered.

"You are not Harry Potter," repeated Harry. "You are an imposter. Harry Potter has green eyes. You have brown."

"What!" "No way!" "Are you out of your mind?" were among the various comments the students shouted at Harry.

Draco shouldered his way past Harry 2 and shoved Harry hard. Harry fell back a step, but did not respond. "That's not true!" yelled Draco. Draco turned to Harry 2 and demanded, "Tell him. Tell him that you're Harry Potter!"

Harry 2 had turned sheet white. He tried to laugh dismissively, but it came out sounding insincere. "Of course, I'm Harry Potter," he said. But, he didn't sound convincing. "Who says Harry Potter has green eyes, anyway?" he challenged. "No one else has ever mentioned it."

Harry thought quickly. "Hagrid told me," he lied. Silently, Harry kicked himself. He had let his temper get the better of him and had unmasked Harry 2. But, he didn't have a story ready to explain how he knew that Harry 2 was an imposter. Winging it, Harry hoped fervently that no one would ever check with Hagrid. "He was the one who took Potter to his aunt's house after Potter defeated You Know Who. Hagrid told me that the baby looked like his parents – black hair from his father and green eyes from his mother.

"At first, I wondered why no one else questioned why you didn't have green eyes. But, then, I realized that very few people saw Potter as a baby. After all, his parents went into hiding before he was even born. The only picture I've ever seen of the kid wasn't clear enough to see his eye color."

"Kids' eyes change color! Or, Hagrid realized he was mistaken," insisted Harry 2. "He's not the one questioning me." Despite his

arguments, the other students were looking at him more and more suspiciously.

Harry didn't back down. "Potter was already 15 months old when Hagrid last saw him and green eyes don't turn another color. I don't think Hagrid realized that. But, when Hagrid mentioned that the kid had green eyes, I became suspicious and I wondered whether you were a fake. After all, you had denied that you were Harry Potter when you were first found. And, you don't have any scar on your forehead.

"I contacted the school Potter attended before he went missing. It wasn't hard to do. I know how to deal with muggles. I'm a muggleborn, remember?" He enjoyed rubbing that in Harry 2's face. "I pretended that I was a principal of another school where Harry Potter had been a student. I wrote that I needed to reach his relatives but that our files on him were misplaced. I said I remembered that Potter had previously attended this other school and I asked if the principal could give me his family's contact information. And, to make sure that we were talking about the same boy, I wrote that the Harry Potter I was interested in had dark hair and brown eyes." Harry waited a beat, staring directly at the other boy, who gazed back defiantly. "Well, the principal wrote back and said that, unfortunately, he couldn't help me. The Harry Potter who had attended his school had dark hair and green eyes – bright green."

There was silence. The watching students waited anxiously to hear what Harry 2 would say. Harry 2 didn't look at the other students; he kept his eyes trained on Harry and tried to bluff his way through. Going on the offensive, Harry 2 unwittingly hit upon the weak link in Harry's story. "Oh, yeah? Where is this letter? And, why haven't you said anything before?" he challenged.

Harry hesitated a beat. "I threw the letter out." Harry could almost feel the skepticism that greeted this weak response. The students were starting to side with Harry 2 again.

Harry 2 smirked. "A likely tale. You're a liar. Just like you lied about Sirius Black."

Harry's temper rose. "I didn't tell anyone that you were a fake because I thought that you had your reasons for hiding. I figured that you were running away from something and I didn't want to expose you."

"Potter!" The students turned around and saw Professor Snape watching them.

Harry 2 didn't like Snape but, at the moment, he was all too eager to end this conversation. He approached Professor Snape quickly. "Yes, sir?"

Snape looked down his cold eyes at the boy. "I think it best if we went to see the Headmaster." It was clear he had overheard the conversation. Harry 2 said nothing, but he looked sick.

Snape turned to walk away, with Harry 2 following behind. Without looking back, Snape called, "Mr. Twist. Please join us."

Harry hurried to catch up to the professor who was already half-way down the corridor. He didn't speak or look at Harry 2 as they walked to Dumbledore's office.

Snape muttered a password Harry couldn't hear and the gargoyle guarding the entrance to the headmaster's office sprang aside. The boys joined Professor Snape on the spiral stone staircase, which started to rotate and move upwards, like a revolving escalator. Harry had been to the headmaster's office before, so he was not surprised. But, he always felt a bit queasy from the moving staircase.

Professor Dumbledore called out, "Come in," in response to Professor Snape's knock on his door.

The headmaster was sitting behind his desk, with a quill in hand. Obviously, he had been interrupted in the middle of some correspondence. However, when the elderly wizard saw the group standing in his doorway, his eyes widened, he lay down his quill, and leaned back in his large chair.

“Is there a problem?” he asked.

“Headmaster,” began Snape. “Mr. Twist has made an interesting observation, sir. He has pointed out that Mr. Potter’s eyes are brown whereas he claims he has learned that Harry Potter has green eyes -- like his mother.”

Harry couldn’t quite read Snape’s tone of voice. Snape had spoken calmly but there was a hint of strain underlying the words. The man’s eyes glittered oddly and the skin on his face stretched tightly. It was clear that the man was struggling to contain some emotion, but what? Was he glad that Potter might be a fake or was he upset by it?

Dumbledore drew in his breath sharply. His eyes flew to Harry 2, who looked back defiantly. Before Dumbledore could speak, Harry 2 interjected, “This is crazy! I am Harry Potter. Why believe Twist when he says that Potter’s...I mean my...eyes are green? Where’s the proof he claims he has? Conveniently gone, that’s where. He’s just a liar.”

Dumbledore said nothing. He just stared intently at the boy, his gaze piercing, and silence reigned. No one spoke as the long minutes passed. Then, slowly, Dumbledore put his hands on the desk and pushed himself up. He remained stooped over the table for a moment, before gathering his composure, taking a deep breath and straightening. It was clear that he had suffered a tremendous shock.

“Andrew Danirson,” said Dumbledore. Harry 2 gasped and stepped back a step. He gazed in fear at the headmaster.

Dumbledore continued. “You are not Harry Potter. We have been misled. We have seen what we were so eager to see. We wanted you to be Harry Potter so badly, that we didn’t challenge you to prove that you were. And now, looking into your mind, I see that you are not.

“I don’t know why you pretended you were Harry. I can only surmise that you believe you had some compelling reason to do so. But, your actions have led us to abandon our search for the real Harry Potter. He remains lost and who knows in what danger?”

Dumbledore looked away from the boy, who stood silent, eyes downcast. He exchanged looks with Snape and said, heavily, "I must alert the Ministry at once. This is grave news indeed."

"Headmaster, what do we do with Mr. ... Danirson?" asked Snape, his voice dripping with contempt when he said the boy's last name.

Dumbledore glanced back at the boy. "For now, I suggest that you take Mr. Danirson back to his house. We'll discuss this further with the representative from the child welfare department. If Andrew ran away from his family, there must have been a reason."

Andrew lifted his fearful eyes back to Dumbledore. Answering the silent question, Dumbledore responded, "We will not send you back to an abusive situation, Andrew."

Harry, watching silently in the background, thought to himself, "Liar. You left me with my aunt and uncle, knowing what they were."

As if reading his mind, Andrew (still "Harry 2" in Harry's mind) said, "You did with Harry Potter." Dumbledore looked completely taken aback. Andrew rushed on, "I mean, I learned a lot about Harry Potter in the last number of months. He was abused by his aunt and uncle and ran away. That's why everyone thought I was him. You left Harry with his relatives. Why should I trust you to give a damn about me?"

"You know nothing, idiot boy!" snapped Snape.

Dumbledore held up his hand to silence Snape. Drawing a deep breath, he nodded slowly. "You are right, Andrew, to question us. I can only say that Harry Potter's situation was unique. And, we did not realize the degree of danger he was in with his aunt and uncle. But, if you ran away from your parents or guardians because they were harming you, we will take steps to ensure your safety. We can discuss this in greater detail at a later time. I'm sorry but I must speak with the Minister now."

Snape put his hand on Andrew's shoulder and yanked him back toward the door. Irritably, Andrew shrugged off Snape's hand and marched defiantly out of the room. Silently, Harry went to follow in Snape's wake.

"Mr. Twist." Harry turned at Dumbledore's call. Snape and Andrew continued down the stairs, leaving Harry alone with the headmaster. Dumbledore was watching him intently. "When did you realize that Mr. Danirson was not Harry Potter?"

"Er...I...I suspected for some time, headmaster," said Harry, trying to be as truthful as possible. "I only knew for sure recently, when the principal of Potter's old school told me that Potter's eyes were green."

Slowly, watching Harry's reaction carefully, Dumbledore asked, "Why did you wait until now to mention that Harry Potter was an imposter?"

"I didn't think anyone would believe me. Everyone knows I don't get along with Potter ...er, Andrew...and they would have just said that I was jealous of his fame."

"But, your proof was compelling. You had no trouble convincing us that you were correct as soon as you mentioned it to us."

"I... I didn't want to get...Andrew into trouble. I didn't really think it was my place to interfere, sir."

"Yet, you took it upon yourself to contact the principal of Harry's old school asking about Harry Potter's eye color? Even though it 'wasn't your place'?" It was clear Dumbledore didn't believe him.

Harry stayed silent. Dumbledore continued to look at Harry, consideringly. The silence dragged out. Finally, Dumbledore said, "It is...alarming...that Sirius Black escaped yesterday. The timing is oddly coincidental. I had thought we had Harry Potter protected. But, now, we discover that Harry Potter is still missing, the day after Black escapes ..."

Harry interjected, angrily. "Sirius is innocent! I've told you and told you, Peter Pettigrew framed him!"

Harry felt the buzz that indicated that Dumbledore was trying to penetrate his mind. "Stop that!" he swatted at his head, as if a fly were nearby. "I'm telling you the truth!"

Dumbledore gave up trying to use legilimency on the boy. "Well, it is obviously not your fault that Harry Potter is missing. Although, you should have let us know about Mr. Danirson sooner, so that we could have continued our search for Harry."

"Yes, sir. I'm sorry, sir."

"You may go, Mr. Twist."

Harry needed no urging. He exited the room swiftly, practically running back to the Gryffindor common room. He couldn't believe it! The headmaster blamed for letting Sirius Black go. He wasn't sure whether the headmaster thought he had been confunded or was in league with Black but, either way, Dumbledore didn't trust him. And, somehow, Dumbledore thought Harry was a danger to the missing Harry Potter. It would have been laughable if it weren't so serious.

Harry entered the common room and was greeted by dozens of his classmates demanding to know what had happened. Everyone speaking at once gave him an instant headache. "Stop!" he said. Everyone quieted. "I was right. The boy pretending to be Harry Potter is really a kid by the name of Andrew Danirson."

The room erupted. The din was almost unbearable. Harry picked random questions and tried to answer them. "Dumbledore's gone to speak to the Minister to tell him Harry Potter is still missing. I don't know what's going to happen to Danirson, but they are going to try to find his family. Dumbledore thought he was probably abused and that's why he ran away. So, they'll be getting child services involved."

At the mention of abuse, the room quieted down a bit. Hermione piped up, "I'm sorry if he was abused, but it was really wrong to

pretend to be Harry Potter. He put us all in danger! Sirius Black almost killed Ron, looking for Harry, and he wasn't even here!"

Harry started to remind Hermione that Sirius hadn't been trying to kill Ron at all. But, apparently guessing what he was going to say, she continued hurriedly on before Harry could speak, "And, no one's been looking for the real Harry Potter for months!"

Others agreed and the noise swelled again. "I hope that he gets sent to Azkaban," said Ron, angrily. "I always knew he was a prat!"

"You're just angry because you were always toadying up to the kid, thinking he was Harry Potter," said Fred.

"I did not!" denied Ron.

"Just think how Draco Malfoy feels," said George.

"Yeah," mused Ron. The thought of Draco learning that he had befriended an imposter put Ron in a better mood.

"It's a good thing that Mark realized that Harry was a fake," continued Hermione.

Harry found himself slapped on the back and congratulated by his housemates.

"Good going!" said Percy. "It doesn't make up for your helping Black escape yesterday, of course. But, no one can blame you too much for that – it's clear you weren't in your right mind."

Harry set his teeth and used all of his self-restraint not to respond. He was relieved when, after a few more minutes, the other students started to drift away, to chat among themselves.

"Why didn't you tell me that you knew Potter was a fake?" asked Ron angrily.

Harry was taken aback at Ron's anger. "Er...I only learned recently and I...wasn't sure what to do."

"You didn't trust me to keep a secret, did you?"

"Of course, I trust you, Ron. I'm sorry! I should have told you. I made a mistake. I wasn't thinking clearly."

It was obvious that Ron was still annoyed with his friend, but he gave a jerky nod of his head to show that he was willing to forgive him. Harry realized that he had hurt Ron's feelings. He should have thought of a better way to unveil the fake Potter. He had let his temper get the best of him and he hadn't thought it through.

Dinner was a strange affair, as everyone kept looking around for Andrew Danirson. In scanning the room himself, Harry noticed that Professor Lupin's chair was empty at the staff table.

"I heard he took ill," said Hermione, noticing where Harry was looking. "It's a good thing he gave his exams before he became sick," she added.

Ron muttered under his breath, "And how is that a good thing?"

Harry ignored them as he thought about Lupin. He had briefly toyed with approaching the professor to discuss Sirius Black's innocence. After all, Lupin had been one of the Marauders and Sirius' friend. But, on the other hand, what would be the point of speaking with Lupin? The fact that Sirius hadn't approached Lupin himself meant that Sirius either didn't trust the other man or didn't think that Lupin would believe him. Either way, what purpose would be served by Harry's speaking with the teacher? Oh, well, if Lupin was ill, there was nothing more that Harry could do anyway.

Along with everyone else, Harry kept glancing over at the Slytherin table, but Andrew Danirson didn't show. Harry wondered whether Dumbledore would say anything about the imposter. He had his

answer, when after the dessert plates were cleared, the headmaster stood up and the Great Hall fell silent.

“I know that there have been rumors flying about the school regarding Harry Potter. I think it only fair to tell you the truth. It is with a heavy heart that I tell you that the boy we knew as Harry Potter is actually Andrew Danirson.”

The students didn't react and continued watching Dumbledore closely. It was clear that everyone had already heard this information.

“Mr. Danirson is American. He was traveling with his parents in Italy when he ran away. According to Mr. Danirson, he ran away because his father was abusive. We have learned that his parents have been searching for him in Italy these last months. They had not realized that he had been able to run as far as Great Britain.

“Mr. Danirson left this evening to return to his grandparents in the United States. He will stay with them while the American child services department decides what to do.

“He has asked that I convey to you all his apologies for having pretended to be Harry Potter. He says that he knows it was wrong. He hopes that you will forgive him for his breach of your trust.”

At this, muttering broke out. Harry heard Ron breathe, “I just better never see the git again or I'll show him how much I ‘forgive’ him!” Harry suspected many of the other students' comments were in a similar vein. Harry was also unimpressed with Andrew's "apology." After all, the boy had snuck away in secret, too much of a coward to apologize in person.

Dumbledore waited for the muttering to subside. “I understand your sense of betrayal at Mr. Danirson's actions. I would urge, however, that you balance your anger with compassion toward a boy who was acting out of fear. The same fear, I remind you, that the real Harry Potter may be feeling, wherever he is.”

At the mention of the still missing Harry Potter, the students shifted uneasily. Harry dropped his eyes to the table, feeling guilty. Dumbledore continued, "Needless to say, the Ministry will be continuing its efforts to locate Mr. Potter. We can only hope that he was able to find a safe place to stay, as Mr. Danirson was able to do. It is getting late, and I know you are all tired. So, with that, I will say goodnight."

Dumbledore turned to leave the staff table. He seemed older and more tired than usual, Harry thought. As if sensing his eyes on him, Dumbledore turned his head and looked at Harry. Their eyes caught before Harry lowered his eyes to the Gryffindor dining table.

Dumbledore watched the silent boy for a minute and then slowly left the Great Hall. Why was Mark Twist at the center of so many of the school's scandals? Dumbledore mused. It was very suspicious that Twist had contacted Harry's old school and, having learned that Andrew Danirson was an imposter, stayed silent. Was the boy a rising Dark Wizard, cleverer than Tom Riddle had been in hiding his true intentions?

Well, we'll see whether he can stay out of trouble next year, the headmaster thought to himself.

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Chapter Fifteen – Year Four - Checking Up; The Triwizard Tournament

Harry started off the summer feeling incredibly depressed. Somehow, knowing how close he had come to having a godfather with whom he could have been sharing the summer, made living in the boarding house that much more lonely.

While it was exhilarating to have the freedom of an adult, he felt disconnected from everyone. He couldn't allow anyone to get too close to him, even if they wished. He was already living a constant lie while in the wizarding world, pretending to be the muggleborn, Mark Twist. In the muggle world, his masquerade was even more far-reaching: pretending to be a young man of 20. Harry felt that his balancing act was becoming more and more dangerous. In fact, he had almost forgotten, when turning into his older version of Mark Twist, to age himself from last year. Remembering, he had added a few more inches to his height and some stubble on his chin. He noticed, with alarm, that some of the women at the boarding house were starting to cast him flirtatious looks.

When he allowed himself to think of the wizarding world, Harry worried about Sirius – had he been caught? Was he still searching for Pettigrew? And Pettigrew! Was that sniveling coward on his way to help Voldemort rise to power again? He couldn't help remembering Professor Trewlaney's prediction. "... the servant will break free and set out to rejoin his master. The Dark Lord will rise again with his servant's aid, greater and more terrible than ever before. ..." Harry was now a believer in Professor Trewlaney's talent for prophecy. If Voldemort were to regain power, Harry needed to be prepared. Voldemort was sure to come after Harry.

So, while the boy craved companionship, he knew that he had to avoid it. He had to focus on staying alive and hidden. His masquerade was the priority – not making friends. So, he buried himself in reading and work.

One morning on the way to work, Harry looked up to see Albus Dumbledore coming down the street. It was so unexpected, Harry

froze with one foot still lifted, descending the steps in front of the house where he lived. Luckily, the headmaster was on the opposite side of the street looking at the house numbers he was passing. He had not yet noticed Harry. Thinking quickly, and thanking his good fortune that no one else was around, Harry de-aged Mark Twist, turning back into his 13, almost 14, year old self.

Dumbledore looked up and saw Harry watching him. He smiled in greeting and strode calmly toward the boy, as if there were nothing surprising in his being on this particular muggle street. The headmaster certainly looked out of place. He was wearing black robes, which swirled around him as he walked, emphasizing his regal appearance. Muggles passing cast him surreptitious looks.

“Hello, Mark,” greeted the headmaster.

Harry continued down the steps toward the older man. “Hello, sir.”

“You are, no doubt, wondering why I am here?” asked Professor Dumbledore. Harry inclined his head. “I have come to meet your parents. I realize I’ve been remiss in not introducing myself to them before. You have faced danger in the school now three years in a row. Any wizarding parent would have been demanding an audience with me to discuss your safety. I want to assure your parents that we will do our best to look after you better from now on.” He smiled benignly.

Harry gave a weak smile. “Actually, sir. I haven’t shared the details of my time at Hogwarts with my parents. I didn’t want to alarm them.”

“Ah. Understandable, perhaps. But, it is always a good idea to be open with one’s parents, Mark.”

“Yes, sir. But, they aren’t too happy that I go to Hogwarts at all. I don’t want to give them a reason to say I can’t attend.”

“They don’t like the fact you’re a wizard?”

“They...are uncomfortable with it, sir. It came as such a surprise, you see.”

“I do see. Mark, please don’t think that I’m not enjoying our chat but I think we should move inside now. I would appreciate your introducing me to your parents.”

“Oh, but, sir. Perhaps it would be best if you didn’t ...” Harry’s voice trailed off. It was clear from Dumbledore’s steady gaze that the older man had no intention of leaving without speaking with Harry’s parents.

“Shall we?” suggested Dumbledore, indicating that Harry lead the way back up the stairs to the house where the boy lived.

Harry hesitated. “Is there something wrong?” asked Dumbledore suspiciously.

“I’m sorry, sir. It’s just that I...I have a job that I’m going to be late for. My parents don’t have a lot of money, so I need to work during the summer to earn some spending money. I don’t want to be rude but, would you mind very much if I left to go to my job? My mom’s away visiting her sister. But, my father’s inside. Actually, he should be coming out very soon himself. He likes to spend Saturday morning at the corner coffee house, reading the paper.”

“Of course, Mark. I am perfectly capable of introducing myself to your father. I’m sorry that you won’t be able to join us.”

“Thank you. I’m sorry to have to leave, sir. Good-bye.” Harry backed away, hesitantly.

“Have a good summer, Mark.”

With a last nod, Harry turned and hurried away. Professor Dumbledore watched until the boy turned the corner and then he climbed the stairs to the house. He was distracted for a minute by a series of loud bangs off in the distance, from the direction Mark Twist had taken. However, the noise sounded like firecrackers, rather than anything more alarming, and the bangs died away after a while. Deciding that the noise was not signaling any serious problem,

Dumbledore lifted his hand to knock on the door, but it opened before he had a chance.

A slight man, in his middle forties, with thinning mousy brown hair and glasses stood in the doorway. He started with surprise at seeing someone about to knock, just as he had opened the door. His resemblance to Mark was hard to miss and Dumbledore was not surprised that, when he asked, "Mr. Twist?" the other man nodded and replied, "Yes. Hello. Can I help you?"

The headmaster inclined his head and smiled. "Hello, Mr. Twist. I am Albus Dumbledore, headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Perhaps Mark has mentioned me?"

Immediately, the other man stiffened his body somewhat and, while still polite, seemed to withdraw a bit. "Yes, of course. Mark is...very fond of the school. Is there something wrong? Has Mark gotten into some sort of trouble?"

"No, not at all," assured Dumbledore. "Would it be possible to come inside and discuss this further?"

The other man flushed and apologized. "Oh, forgive me. I didn't mean to keep you talking on the stoop. Unfortunately, we share a living room with some other families. If you want privacy, we're better off at the coffee house just down the street. I'm usually able to find a table in a quiet corner at this time of day. You are welcome to join me."

"That would be nice, thank you," agreed Dumbledore and the two men walked in silence to the coffee house.

Harry, who had transformed himself into his "father," was relieved that he had been able to lead Dumbledore away from the house. So, far, his luck was holding. When he had realized that Dumbledore was insistent on meeting his parents, Harry had thought quickly. He knew that he had to gain some time to be able to return to the house, and pretend to be his own father. So, after he was out of Dumbledore's sight, he had pushed over a number of dustbins, which had rolled around causing a racket. The noise had distracted Dumbledore for

the few minutes Harry had needed to run back to the house, using the alleyway that ran behind the home. He had entered through the back door, transformed into Mr. Twist senior, narrowly avoided one of his housemates who was on his way to the kitchen, and opened the front door mere seconds before Dumbledore had knocked.

At the coffee house, Harry was able to procure a quiet table in the corner. He ordered tea for himself and the headmaster. Harry tried to imagine how a parent would behave upon being confronted unexpectedly by his child's headmaster. But, he had no idea. He decided to let Dumbledore lead the conversation.

"Thank you, Mr. Twist, for taking the time to meet with me. As I said, Mark isn't in any trouble. Mark is actually one of our better students. I just thought it would be a good idea to meet the parents of such an academically-gifted child."

Mr. Twist looked disapproving. "I can't say that I'm that thrilled Mark is so good at..." He looked around to make sure no one was listening and then, lowering his voice, whispered, "magic."

Dumbledore seemed a bit surprised. "Do you have a problem with the wizarding world?"

"It's just that it's so unnatural. But, his mother said that Mark should be allowed to go to the school and learn what they could teach him. After all, he was doing such odd stuff. He might as well learn to control it."

"What kind of 'odd stuff' do you mean?"

"Well, he'd make a book fly across the room. Or, he'd make the lights turn on and off. Just things like that. It would usually happen if Mark were upset."

"Accidental magic is very common in wizard children, Mr. Twist. It's nothing to be alarmed about."

"Hmpf!" Mr. Twist didn't look too pleased as he sipped his tea.

Cautiously, Dumbledore asked, "Mark didn't do anything else, did he?"

At Mr. Twist's puzzled expression, the headmaster continued tentatively, "Did Mark try to make any children obey him, for example? Or threaten to hurt anyone?"

Harry felt his temperature rise. So, this is what Dumbledore's visit was about. He had been right to think that the headmaster didn't trust Mark Twist. And, now, the older man was digging into Mark's background to learn more about him. While part of Harry wanted to tell Dumbledore stories of Mark's twisted behavior, just to see how the other wizard would react, Harry's more mature side prevailed. Forcing his voice to a calm tone, he replied, "No. He was always a good boy. A bit quiet, though."

Dumbledore nodded, looking slightly relieved. "And how are his friends?"

"He doesn't have many friends. Mark is pretty solitary. I think that's why he likes this school of his."

Dumbledore nodded and finished his tea. "Well, Mr. Twist, I wanted to make sure that you realized you can contact me any time if you have anything you need to discuss with me about Mark. Please call this number," Dumbledore gave him a card. "This will connect you to a routing station that can put you in touch with me. I thank you for your time, sir."

Dumbledore stood up. Politely, Mr. Twist stood up as well and said, "Thank you for the telephone number. I'll be sure to call you, if any problems arise. But, everything's fine now. Thank you for coming to see me. I appreciate the concern."

"Goodbye." Dumbledore swept from the coffee house, leaving Mr. Twist behind to enjoy his morning paper.

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Harry turned Dumbledore's visit over in his mind again and again. It was clear that the headmaster was very concerned about Mark Twist if he had taken the time to come personally to speak with Mark's parents. This wasn't an easy time for Dumbledore, he knew. Hermione had mentioned that the Daily Prophet had had scathing things to say about the Ministry and Dumbledore, when it was learned that Andrew Danirson had been impersonating Harry Potter for almost a year without being discovered. Apparently, the Ministry had redoubled efforts to find Harry, but to no avail. Yet, with all the concern about the missing boy, Dumbledore had still focused some of his attention on Mark Twist.

It was a shame that Dumbledore hadn't believed him about Sirius' being innocent. Everyone was worried about the wrong things! They were hunting Sirius Black, not realizing that Peter Pettigrew was the danger and that Voldemort would arise again. And, the last thing Dumbledore needed to worry about was Mark Twist!

Harry spent the rest of his summer working hard. If Voldemort was going to rise again, Harry wanted to be as prepared as possible. He spent time reading as much as he could on all of his subjects, but he missed the power of feeling magic flow through his veins. That thrill of control. Unfortunately, he couldn't practice any magic during the summer that required a wand, or the Ministry would come down on him for violating the statute prohibiting underage magic. But, he was capable of some wandless magic, most notably his ability to change his appearance and his skill at repelling attempts to read his mind. Harry wondered whether there were any other skills he could master without using a wand. He spent hours trying to lift objects without a wand, but didn't think he had made any progress. Once in a while he thought an object may have twitched, but it could have been wishful thinking.

Of course, there were certain branches of magic that did not rely on wands at all. But, Harry he didn't have the laboratory space, specialized ingredients or equipment required for potions. Similarly, the study of herbology or magical creatures was limited without live specimens.

Knowing that his father had been an animagus, Harry spent some time reading about that subject in particular. His initial attempts to transform were unsuccessful, but he vowed to continue trying.

A few weeks before summer break was over, Harry woke up from a terrible dream with his scar throbbing painfully. He sat up gasping in his bed, trying to stifle his moans to avoid waking the other men who shared the room. Before his dream faded in the mists of his mind, Harry tried to remember what he had been dreaming before he awoke.

Peter Pettigrew had been there. While Harry hadn't seen the person to whom Wormtail was speaking, he shuddered in recollection of the cold, high voice. He would recognize it anywhere: it was Lord Voldemort's. He had spoken with Voldemort at the end of his first year at Hogwarts, when the Dark Lord had tried to convince Harry to give him the Philosopher's Stone hidden in Harry's pocket at the time. That chilling voice had haunted Harry's nightmares for weeks. Now, the cold voice had been talking with Wormtail about killing someone. "One more curse...my faithful servant at Hogwarts... It is decided, Wormtail. There will be no more argument."

A large snake had slithered on the floor in the dark room. An old man Harry didn't recognize had entered the room and, with a flash of green light that Harry found vaguely familiar, Voldemort had killed him and Harry had woken.

Was it a dream? Harry wanted desperately to believe that it was but he couldn't quite convince himself. He had been worrying for weeks that Professor Trewlaney's prediction would come true and his vision seemed to confirm it: Wormtail was helping Voldemort rise again.

Harry wished that there was someone in whom he could confide. Should he send an anonymous note to Dumbledore, telling him that Voldemort was regaining strength? That seemed foolish. Dumbledore wouldn't believe an anonymous note and what if there was some spell that enabled Dumbledore to tell who had sent the note? The last thing he wanted was for the headmaster to focus upon Mark Twist again.

After much vacillating, Harry decided to say nothing about his “dream”. He rationalized that the limited information he had wouldn’t actually help Dumbledore or anyone else to do anything. He would wait and see if he learned anything else.

Of more importance, Harry thought, was the fact that he had been able to see what Voldemort was thinking. If, indeed, his vision had been real, then Harry had been viewing the scene from Voldemort’s own eyes. How was he able to do this? Could it be that Harry had some seer talent? He didn’t think so. He had been rubbish in Professor Trewlaney’s class. Besides, this wasn’t a prediction. It felt like he was viewing something happening at that moment. And, if it was some divination ability, why did his scar hurt? No. Harry’s ability to see through Voldemort’s eyes was linked to the scar. What strange link existed between him and Voldemort? Harry shivered. He didn’t like to think that he and Voldemort had any link at all.

With a sinking feeling, Harry suddenly thought of his ability to speak parseltongue. He had avoided thinking about it before, but maybe now was the time to consider the possible explanations for this mysterious talent. He knew he wasn’t the heir of Slytherin. That was Voldemort, as Tom Riddle himself had said when releasing the basilisk in the Chamber of Secrets. But, if Harry was not the heir of Slytherin (and he was mightily glad he was not), how come he could speak parseltongue? Was this, too, attributable to some link with Voldemort? Harry started to feel sick as he considered that he had a link to Voldemort’s mind, with his scar acting as a sort of measuring rod, indicating the strength of the link at that moment in time.

For a number of days following the realization that he had a connection of some sort with Voldemort, Harry feared going to sleep. He felt as if he had a cancerous growth in his head. He had always known he shouldn’t trust other people but now it felt as if he shouldn’t trust himself either. If he was able to see through Voldemort’s eyes, could Voldemort see through his? And, was Voldemort somehow taking possession of Harry, as Tom Riddle’s diary had taken possession of Ginny? After all, Harry was able to speak parseltongue without having learned the language or even being aware that he could speak it. Did this mean that Voldemort had possession of that

piece of Harry's brain where language was processed? What if Voldemort had possession of other pieces of Harry's brain too?

Eventually, the terror of Harry's thoughts took so much energy out of the young wizard, he stopped worrying from sheer exhaustion. He felt as he imagined someone might feel who had been given a diagnosis of a terminal illness. At first, there would be terror and denial. A sense of betrayal from one's own body. But, after a while, the panic would have to subside to give way to the daily need for survival, at least in the short term. He calmed himself with thoughts that he had no reason to believe he was being possessed by Voldemort -- he hadn't fallen unconscious and woken up hours later with no recollection of what had passed in the intervening time. Besides, this connection to Voldemort would surely end, Harry assured himself, as soon as he defeated the Dark Lord once and for all.

By the time September 1 came round again, Harry was more than ready to return to school. He was eager to see his friends. But, he was equally eager to throw himself back into his classes. He had an uneasy feeling that he was in a race against time. Even now, somewhere in the world, Voldemort was regaining power and he, Harry, was the only one who knew. His scar had been starting to pain him regularly and he knew that it was warning him that his fears were real.

Harry went to Diagon Alley to gather his school supplies the day before he was to board the Hogwarts Express. He found everyone there speaking of nothing but the Dark Mark that had been cast into the sky at the Quidditch World Cup. Harry felt a sinking sensation in his stomach. Had it already started? Voldemort's rise to power? He worried about Ron. He knew that his friend had been planning to attend the World Cup with his family. He hoped that everyone was okay; he couldn't wait to see Ron the next day to ask him all about it.

Harry was among the first to arrive at King's Cross platform 9 $\frac{3}{4}$ the next day. He had slept the night before at The Leaky Cauldron. He awoke early and made his way to the train station. He knew that most 14 year olds would have found the experience either daunting or exciting. But, Harry was used to living at the boarding house during

the summer and he used either public transportation or taxi cabs all the time. He was easily able to take care of himself.

“Mark!” Harry turned around to see Ron wheeling a cart containing his trunk. Ginny was following close behind, next to Mrs. Weasley and two young men who Harry didn’t recognize. Given their resemblance to the other Weasleys, Harry guessed the men were Ron’s older brothers, Charlie and Bill. Fred and George were off in the distance, talking to their friend, Lee Jordan. Percy had graduated the year before, so there was one less Weasley taking the train this year.

“Hello, everyone,” called Harry, smiling happily to Ron and his family. Ginny smiled back shyly and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley called back a pleasant greeting.

Harry was introduced to Bill and Charlie, who shook his hand politely. Harry thought they were both fascinating. Charlie was a bit shorter than his brothers but more compact and very strong. He was tanned and had some burns on his forearms, which was an occupational hazard of working with dragons, as Harry recalled Ron telling him was what his second eldest brother did for a living.

Bill, on the other hand, was more suave and cool. He wore with his hair in a ponytail and had a fang earring dangling from his ear. Harry knew that he worked for Gringotts as a curse-breaker. The Weasleys had visited Bill in Egypt the previous year, but Bill had decided to come back to England to work.

“Ron’s told us all about you,” said Bill, smiling.

“Don’t believe a word he says,” responded Harry with a laugh. Looking around, he didn’t see Mr. Weasley, so he asked, “Where’s your father?”

Charlie responded, “He had to help with an emergency that came up just as we were leaving.”

Bill explained, "An old friend of Dad's, Mad-Eye Moody, attacked some muggles last night and Dad needed to make sure that Mad-Eye doesn't get into trouble. Mad-Eye is an ex-Auror – that's a dark wizard catcher. He's a bit paranoid now that he's retired and attacked the muggles probably assuming that they were dark wizards in disguise who were trying to kill him or something."

Charlie finished with, "Anyway, Bill and I said we'd see everyone to the train instead."

"I heard about the scare at the Quidditch World Cup," Harry burst out. He couldn't wait to find out what had happened. "I'm glad you are all alright. Tell me what happened!"

"It was crazy!" said Ron, excitedly. "There were screams everywhere, and tents were on fire. You Know Who supporters were marching in masks, torturing the muggles who ran the camp site we were at. Then, the Dark Mark appeared in the sky and the place went wild. Fred, George and I looked after Ginny, while Dad, Percy, Bill and Charlie went to help the Ministry officials find out who did it."

Mrs. Weasley looked grave. Ginny added, "It turned out that the house elf of Mr. Crouch, who is the head of the Department of International Magical Co-operation was found near where the spell for the Dark Mark had been cast. He was so angry. He gave her clothes!"

"Well, that's a good thing, isn't it?" asked Harry, in confusion.

"Not for Winky! She was very upset. She begged him not to set her free, but Mr. Crouch said that she had disobeyed him by leaving the camp grounds."

Ron picked up the tale again. "No one could find the person who actually cast the spell. A house elf couldn't have done it, of course."

Mrs. Weasley tried to change the subject. "That's enough about that. I'm sure it was just an isolated event. Some Death Eater who the Ministry will find eventually."

Harry cast a glance at Bill and Charlie, who didn't seem to share their mother's optimism. But, Charlie, understanding that his mother wanted to speak of something else, said, "You'll have plenty to keep you busy this year at Hogwarts, without worrying about what happened at the World Cup."

"What do you mean?" demanded Ron.

Charlie just smiled knowingly. "I can't say. Dumbledore will be telling you shortly. But, I will tell you this: it will be an exciting year for you all."

Bill echoed the sentiment. "I wish I could be back at Hogwarts this year."

Ron, Ginny and Harry all exchanged looks, wondering what the others could mean. By now, the station had filled with returning students and Ginny went off to find her friends. Harry boarded the train with Ron to find a compartment. Hermione and Neville Longbottom joined them, and once the trip was underway, the teenagers spent the time discussing the events at the Quidditch World Cup and wondering what could be the exciting secret that Dumbledore would soon be telling them.

When they arrived at Hogsmeade, Harry noticed Cho Chang, a fifth year from Ravenclaw. She glanced at him and smiled. Harry felt a little dip in his stomach. She was so pretty! For the first time since he had adopted his secret identity, Harry wished that he had chosen a more handsome persona. He had made Mark Twist a little plain, thinking that this would help him fade into the background. But, now, he wished that he had thought to make his alter-ego more attractive.

Harry walked into the Great Hall with a feeling of homecoming. He had missed this place so much over the last few months! He enjoyed watching the sorting ceremony and then eagerly tucked into the feast that appeared magically on the tables. He was taken aback to learn, from a chance remark made by the Gryffindor ghost, Nearly Headless Nick, that the food had been prepared by house elves. He hadn't realized that Hogwarts had over a hundred elves in residence.

Hermione was so upset, she refused to eat, but Harry didn't see how refusing to eat would help the elves. Rather, he made a mental note to see if he could speak with some of the elves and make sure that they were being treated kindly. He remembered all too well how poorly Dobby, the Malfoys' former house elf, had been treated. He couldn't imagine that Dumbledore would allow such treatment at Hogwarts. But, he would doublecheck himself.

When the feast was over, Dumbledore rose to give the beginning of year announcements. Harry leaned forward eagerly. Perhaps they would learn the big secret now. But, before Dumbledore could tell them anything important, there was a crash of thunder and a man entered the Great Hall. He was a frightening figure, with a terribly scarred face, a wooden leg, and a blue magical eye where one of his own brown eyes was missing. The magical eye rolled around in its casing, looking in all directions. When the casing went white for a brief moment, Harry suspected that the eye had disappeared around the back, and was able to see out of the back of the stranger's head.

Dumbledore greeted the man warmly, and gestured him to sit next to him at the staff table. Turning to the students, Dumbledore announced, "May I introduce our new Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Moody."

Mad-Eye Moody! The ex-Auror Mr. Weasley had gone to help that morning. Fleetingly, Harry wondered what had happened to Lupin. Maybe the man wasn't well enough to keep teaching. Last year, the professor had seemed to be ill a lot of the time.

Once Mad-Eye had settled into his seat next to Dumbledore, the headmaster resumed his announcement. "It is my very great pleasure to inform you that the Triwizard Tournament will be taking place at Hogwarts this year."

The students who were from wizarding families erupted in gasps and cheers. Muggleborn students looked as confused as Harry felt. He listened carefully as, once quiet was restored, Dumbledore explained, "The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago, as a friendly competition between the three

largest European schools of wizardry – Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. A champion was selected to represent each school, and the three champions competed in three magical tasks. The tournament has been discontinued for centuries because the death toll mounted so high. However, we have decided to try the tournament again. The Departments of International Magical Cooperation and Magical Games have worked hard over the summer to put in safety features to protect the champions.

“Durmstrang and Beauxbatons will be bringing a select group of students to spend the year at Hogwarts. On Halloween, an impartial judge will decide which of these students will represent their school. Any Hogwarts student who is 17 years or older may decide to enter to be Hogwarts selection as champion. The champion who wins the tournament will win the Triwizard Cup, glory for their school, and a thousand Galleons personal prize money.”

The children talked excitedly of the event for the rest of the evening. Harry overheard a number of the students, including Fred and George, planning how they would circumvent the age restriction Dumbledore had mentioned.

Harry enjoyed imagining himself entering the tournament and winning the Cup. But, it was just a daydream. He smiled before falling off to sleep. Be patient, he told himself. After all, he was meant for such glory eventually. The Dursleys may have told him he was worthless all of his life, but his mother had faith in him. She had known he was born to be a hero. Someday, he would be in front of crowds of people who would be calling his name as the conqueror – for once and for all – of Lord Voldemort. That would be better than the Triwizard Tournament.

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Defense Against the Dark Arts class with Professor Moody was amazing. The man was seriously frightening and Harry was thankful that Moody was on the “good” side. He didn’t want to have to meet him in a dark alley at night!

In their first class with the ex-Auror, he taught them about the three Unforgivable Curses, any one of which carried a lifetime sentence in Azkaban: the Imperius Curse, used by Voldemort and his Death Eaters to control their victims; the Cruciatus Curse, used to torture people; and Avada Kedavra, also known as the Killing Curse. When Moody demonstrated this last curse, killing a spider, there was a flash of blinding green light and a rushing sound. The spider keeled over dead.

Moody prodded the spider with his wand and explained, clinically, "There is no mark left with the Avada Kedavra curse. It is instantaneous and completely unblockable. There is only one person ever known to have survived the curse: Harry Potter."

Harry ignored the excited muttering issuing throughout the room. He stared intently at the spider but, in his mind, he was seeing a different scene. The green light seemed so familiar. This was how Voldemort had killed that old man in the vision Harry had had during the summer. It was also how his parents had been killed and how Voldemort had tried to kill him when he was a baby.

In the common room, Ron spent a large portion of the night reliving the lesson. "Is Moody cool or what? He really knows his stuff. When he did Avada Kedavra, the way the spider just died, just snuffed it right there. And Harry Potter survived that! Can you imagine? Just a little baby – and that green light went flashing toward him. And, pow! Instead of dying, he gets a scar and You Know Who is gone. I wish I knew how he did it," said Ron, shaking his head in disbelief.

"You and everyone else," said Seamus.

Harry kept silent. Ron was talking about the Killing Curse as if it were some exciting story. But, the curse had robbed Harry of his parents and sentenced him to a life apart. He buried himself behind a book, to hide how upset the conversation was making him. He didn't notice that Neville Longbottom was equally quiet.

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In his next lesson, Professor Moody informed the class that he would be placing the Imperius Curse on each of them, so that they could see what it felt like and try to resist it. One by one the students were placed under the curse and did whatever Professor Moody directed them to do: quacking like ducks, singing songs, or hopping on one foot. Neville was able to do gymnastic moves he would never have been able to do ordinarily.

When Moody called "Twist," Harry moved forward. He was worried about what Moody would have him do. Moody pointed his wand at Harry and said, "Imperio!" Harry was vaguely aware that a wave of relaxation was attempting to penetrate his mind. It reminded him of the annoying buzzing he felt when someone tried to read his mind. Reacting in much the same way, he irritably shook his head to make the buzzing stop.

Moody said, "Jump onto the desk...jump onto the desk..."

Harry looked at the teacher in surprise. Why would he jump onto the desk? Was this all there was to the Imperius Curse? Or, had Moody not cast the full strength on him, waiting for Harry to let down his guard before doing his worst?

Moody stared back at Harry in shock. Pointing his wand at the boy, he said in a strong, forceful voice, "Imperio!" Again, Harry was aware of a wave of relaxation that tried to penetrate his mind. It felt as if it were bumping against a wall. "Jump on the desk!" demanded Moody.

Harry stood still and, looking directly into Moody's eyes, said calmly, "No, I will not."

Moody lowered his wand and spoke as if to himself. "I've never seen anything like it. Never have I met anyone who was so completely unaffected by the Imperius Curse. It's astonishing."

The other students were looking at Harry with admiration and a hint of fear. Harry realized, belatedly, that he should have pretended to be affected at least somewhat by the Imperius Curse. Just what he needed! More rumors that Mark Twist was the next Dark Lord!

As he lay in bed that night, Harry wondered why he was able to deflect the Imperius Curse so completely. The more he thought about it, the more he believed that it had to do with his mind's control over his inner self. He had hidden the real Harry Potter away, behind an invisible barrier in his mind, which he had triggered instinctively when he had left his Aunt's house. This barrier acted to prevent all external penetration: no mind reading and no Imperius Curse. Only the Sorting Hat had been able to peer inside his head, but that was a magical object designed by the four founders for the sole purpose of looking into students' minds.

Harry felt a wave of pride and pleasure. If his guess was right, he had a powerful weapon in his arsenal. Somehow, he had unleashed this power. It was just a shame he didn't know how he had done it. If he ever learned, he might be able to channel it in other ways as well.

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The representatives from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang arrived at the school the day before Halloween. Harry joined his classmates in watching the Beaubatons students pull up in front of the school in a flying carriage, harnessed to a team of enormous horses. Almost immediately thereafter, a large ship emerged in the middle of the Dark Lake carrying the Durmstrang contingency. When the Durmstrang students disembarked, there was a surge in excitement as Ron and others recognized one of the boys as Victor Krum, a Quidditch player for the Bulgarian national team. Krum had been the star of the Bulgarian team during the recent World Cup event.

That night, the delegations from the two schools joined the Hogwarts students at dinner. Ron was disappointed that Krum, along with the other Durmstrang students, sat with the Slytherin table. The Beauxbaton students joined Ravenclaw. Ron called Harry's attention to a particularly pretty Beauxbaton female, who Ron claimed was part-Veela. Harry, turning to look at the girl, caught Cho Chang's eye. Blushing, he dropped his own eyes back to the Gryffindor table.

Squirming in embarrassment, Harry didn't notice that the headmaster had stood up until the room became suddenly silent. Looking up in surprise, he saw that Dumbledore had raised his arms to quiet the

students. Smiling, he said, "The moment has come. The Triwizard Tournament is about to start."

Harry listened intently as Dumbledore explained the rules of the tournament. Harry leaned forward to watch as eagerly as his neighbors when Dumbledore opened a casket and took out a large wooden cup, filled with dancing, blue-white flames. The headmaster explained that anyone wanting to enter the tournament had to place his or her name into the Goblet of Fire before the next night. On Halloween, the Goblet would choose one champion from each school to compete in the tournament.

Dumbledore's voice became grave as he warned, "I wish to impress upon any of you wishing to compete that this Tournament is not to be entered into lightly. Once a champion has been selected by the Goblet of Fire, he or she is obliged to see the Tournament through to the end. The placing of your name in the Goblet constitutes a binding, magical contract."

When the feast came to an end, Harry walked back to Gryffindor Tower, and joined in the speculation as to which student would represent Hogwarts. He hoped that Angelina Johnson, a fellow Gryffindor, would be selected but, secretly thought it was likely that Cedric Diggory, a seventh year Hufflepuff would be the choice.

Harry did not think that Fred and George would be able to submit their names, despite their determination to do so. He was dubious about the success of their plan to overcome the Age Line that Dumbledore had drawn around the Goblet. Sure enough, the next day, when the twins took a drop of an aging potion and crossed the line, it threw them back violently. But, they joined in the laughter of their classmates when they saw the long white beards each had sprouted.

On Halloween night, the excitement in the castle was palpable. Looking around the Great Hall, Harry thought to himself that he was so lucky to be able to attend Hogwarts when the Triwizard Tournament was being held. He had never had such a good time.

Bartemius Crouch, the Head of the Department of International Magical Co-operation, and Ludo Bagman, Head of the Department of Magical Games, each said some brief words of welcome. Then, the Goblet was brought forward and Dumbledore dimmed the candles in the Hall. Harry shivered in anticipation.

The Goblet shone brightly and its blue flame turned to red. Sparks flew and a piece of parchment fluttered out. Dumbledore caught the parchment and read, "The champion for Durmstrang is Viktor Krum."

There were cheers for Viktor as he rose from the Slytherin table and went through the door behind the staff table. "No surprises there!" said Ron.

The Goblet turned red again and spat out another piece of parchment. "The champion for Beauxbatons is Fleur Delacour," read Dumbledore.

The beautiful girl Ron had pointed out to Harry earlier rose gracefully from her seat and followed Krum through the door behind the staff table. A number of the other Beauxbaton students were sobbing in disappointment.

Silence fell on the Hall as the students held their collective breath. Who would be the Hogwarts champion? The flames of the Goblet turned red again and Dumbledore caught a third piece of parchment that fluttered into the air. "The Hogwarts champion is Cedric Diggory."

The Hufflepuff table was cheering so loudly, they didn't hear Ron's disappointed, "No!" Cedric was generally popular with the other houses as well, so there was supportive applause throughout the Hall.

Cedric, smiling happily, also disappeared into the side chamber. Dumbledore called for quiet once again and said, "Well, we now have our three champions..."

But, he stopped speaking abruptly when the Goblet turned red once more. Sparks flew and a fourth piece of parchment fluttered into the air. Dumbledore reached for the flying piece of charred parchment

and stared at it in silence. After a long pause, he read out, "Mark Twist."

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Chapter Sixteen – Year Four; Pariah; The First Task

When Dumbledore called Mark Twist's name from the parchment spat out by the Goblet of Fire, Harry sat completely still. The shock froze him in place. He felt a strange rushing sound in his ears and he suddenly felt as if he were in a dream. The Great Hall seemed telescoped, as if he were viewing it from a distance.

"Mark Twist!" Dumbledore called more loudly, looking directly at him this time. Feeling a small shove in his back, Harry stumbled to his feet and walked to the front of the Hall. The hostility in the room grew as he walked. He heard mutters of "Cheat!" "Cedric Diggory is the Hogwarts champion!" "How did he get his name in the Goblet?" "Mudblood!"

It took all of Harry's courage not to react to the insults as he passed. When he reached the front, and stood in front of the headmaster, he felt the eyes of all of the students upon him, boring into his back. He looked at the headmaster, in silent plea for an explanation. Dumbledore stared back at him, with a growing hint of anger in his eyes.

"Mark, please follow the other champions into the chamber," he directed coldly.

Harry tried to maintain his composure as he walked out of the Hall. He breathed slowly out of his mouth, and forced himself to stand very straight. To the students and teachers watching, the boy's lifted chin hinted of arrogance and his seeming calm suggested an assurance that came from expecting his name to issue from the Goblet.

When Harry entered the room where Viktor, Fleur and Cedric were waiting, they looked at him in puzzlement. "Have you come to give us a message?" asked Fleur.

Harry shook his head, but did not explain. Before the other champions could ask more questions, they heard the teachers entering the room. Harry turned and faced the headmaster of Durmstrang, Igor Karkaroff, the headmistress of Beauxbatons,

Madame Maxime, Professor Dumbledore, and Professors Snape, McGonagall and Moody. The Ministry officials, Crouch and Bagman, brought up the rear. Everyone was watching him with varying degrees of anger or fury.

Professor Dumbledore spoke first. Although he did not shout, Harry could tell that he was exercising control to maintain his calm. "How did you manage to get past the Age Line, Mark? And, how did you trick the Goblet into choosing you as another champion?"

Behind him, Harry heard Cedric say, "The Goblet chose Mark as a champion, too?"

Harry ignored Cedric's outburst and responded to Dumbledore. He looked him straight in the eye and said clearly and forcefully, "I did not place my name into the Goblet. I do not wish to compete in this tournament. Someone else must have submitted my name. I did not do it."

Dumbledore searched Harry's face intently but did not say anything. Madame Maxime snorted in disbelief. "Of course, 'e iz lying."

Karkaroff bit out, "Is this your way of having two champions for Hogwarts, Dumbledore?"

"I do not wish Mark to compete, Igor," replied Dumbledore.

Barty Crouch spoke up. "We have no choice. Once the Goblet chooses a champion, the wizard selected is obligated to compete."

"Why did you do it, Mark?" asked Professor McGonagall urgently. "Don't you know how dangerous the tournament is?"

Harry turned to his head of house. "I...didn't...put...my...name...in!" he enunciated slowly.

There was a brief silence while everyone stared at him. He looked around the room and realized that no one believed him. "I'm not lying!" his voice started to rise.

“Why would anyone else put your name into ze Goblet?” demanded Fleur.

“I don’t know!”

“It would take a powerful wizard to so confound the Goblet,” mused Moody. “I’m guessing they submitted Twist’s name under a fourth school, to make sure he was the only one in his category...”

“I will be lodging a complaint with the Ministry of Magic and with the International Confederation of Wizards,” threatened Karkaroff.

“You must do as you see fit, Igor,” said Dumbledore. “However, for the matter at hand, it seems clear that we must proceed with the four champions.”

“But Dumbly-dorr --, ” began Madame Maxime.

“If you have any alternative to suggest, I would be delighted to hear it,” offered the headmaster.

When no one responded, Barty Crouch called to the champions and explained that the first task was to take place on November 24 and would be designed to test their courage. Due to the time-consuming training, they would be exempt from end-of-year exams.

Then, Harry and the other champions were permitted to leave. At the door of the chamber, the boy turned back to the adults still assembled in the room, and said in a tight voice, “I did NOT put my name in the Goblet. Someone else did. I don’t know who and I don’t know why, but I don’t think it was because they liked me!” And, not waiting for a reply, he continued on his way back to Gryffindor Tower.

As he walked back to his dormitory, Harry wondered who could have placed his name in the Goblet. He still felt so shocked by the turn of events that his brain was sluggish. Maybe tomorrow he’d be able to think more clearly. Or, Ron or Hermione could help him reason this out. He didn’t believe that anyone had guessed his identity, and the

Goblet hadn't spat out the name of Harry Potter. Did that mean that, whoever had placed his name in the Goblet, had done so to harm Mark Twist, the muggleborn? If so, why? To kill him or just to cause him stress?

Mark Twist had prevented Voldemort from obtaining the Sorcerer's Stone and had destroyed Tom Riddle's diary and the basilisk it had controlled. Could someone have placed his name in the Goblet for these reasons? Or, was it more mundane? Did someone, like Draco Malfoy, for instance, just hate him because he was a muggleborn? But, it seemed so unlikely that a student could have figured out how to confound the Goblet of Fire. As Professor Moody had stated, it would take a very powerful wizard to have tricked the Goblet.

Tomorrow, he promised himself, he would write a list of every adult in this school, and maybe some of the seventh years. He would approach this logically and thoroughly. He would scrutinize the motives of each to try to determine who might have wished to put his name in the Goblet.

Harry hesitated in front of the portrait to the Gryffindor common room. Taking a breath to brace himself, he gave the Fat Lady the password and entered. The room was full of his fellow Gryffindors. Harry hesitated. The silence was deafening. They just all looked at him, waiting. Harry drew a deep breath and then said clearly, "I did not put my name in the Goblet."

A few of the students looked angry at his denial. Ignoring him, Fred said, "You should've told us you'd entered."

"How did you do it without getting a beard?" asked George eying him in irritation.

"I didn't..."

"I don't think it was a good idea, Mark," said Hermione seriously. "Cedric is really popular and people will be angry that you're taking away some of his glory."

“I didn’t...”

“I know you’re a really good student, but do you think a fourth year really has a chance against a seventh year?” asked Neville.

“I didn’t...”

“You were always complaining that people thought you were a Dark Wizard, what with your speaking parseltongue and all. Why do this?” asked Ron, in an angry tone.

“I keep telling you all, I didn’t put my name in!” Harry shouted as loudly as he could. Finally, the other Gryffindors were silenced. They all just stared at him again until some of them, without saying another word, began to drift away. Most dropped their eyes, refusing to meet his. They still didn’t believe him!

“Ron!” called Harry. “Surely, you believe me? I wouldn’t have done something like this without telling you.”

“Yeah, that’s what I would have thought. But, then again, I would have thought you’d have told me that Harry Potter was a fake last year. You kept that a secret, too, didn’t you? Maybe I don’t know you as well as I thought.”

“I can’t believe this!” yelled Harry. “Someone puts my name into the Goblet, probably trying to kill me or at least seriously hurt me. And, instead of trying to help me find out who it is, you’re accusing me of being a liar!”

A number of their classmates listened intently to the conversation between the two boys, but were pretending to be reading or talking with each other in the corners of the room. However, Harry could feel their glances when they thought he didn’t notice them looking his way.

Hermione, who was still standing next to Ron, tried to calm down the boys, but unwittingly threw more fuel on the fire. “Why don’t we just calm down?” she asked. “It doesn’t matter who put your name into the Goblet, right? Tomorrow, we’ll speak with Dumbledore about

withdrawing your name from the tournament. After all, you are under age. It is really dangerous – people got killed all the time. No one would blame you for having second thoughts.”

Harry glared at her. “I’m not having second thoughts! I never had first thoughts! I did not place my name in the Goblet!” And, he stormed up the stairs to his bedroom, where he threw himself down on his bed, and drew the four poster curtains around him for privacy. He pretended to be asleep when his roommates finally came to bed, but he lay awake for hours staring at the ceiling. He had never felt as alone in Hogwarts before. And, to think, just hours before he had never felt happier.

The dark enclosure reminded him of his cupboard at Privet Drive. Then, often hungry or in pain from some beating he had suffered, he had felt all alone in the world. He had spun fairy tale dreams of parents who would rescue him from his imprisonment. They would tell him how he was a prince, kidnapped by an evil villain, sold to the treacherous Dursleys who were masquerading as his relatives to trick him. Those dreams had come true in a way, when he had learned that he was the destined hero of the wizarding world.

He knew it was only a matter of time before he would be embraced by the admiring multitudes for ridding their world of Voldemort. He clung to this belief with an almost painful intensity. It had to be true. There could be no mistake. His mother had known he was to be a hero. He would do anything to make this a reality. He had been content to wait, secure in the knowledge that he would kill the Dark Lord in time. While he might not be happy to have to hide his identity, he had known that it was a necessary precaution. And, on some level, it had felt romantic. The prince – incognito. But, he had not expected to be an outcast within his own kingdom.

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The next few days were miserable for Harry. It seemed as if the whole school was angry at or disappointed with him. Ron was so annoyed with him, that he started to avoid spending any time with Harry. Only Ginny Weasley went out of her way to show him that she still was his friend. She sat next to him at mealtimes, and spoke of

inconsequential matters. Harry knew that she had a crush on him because he had saved her from Tom Riddle's possession. Whatever the reason, Harry was glad to have someone willing to spend time with him without casting him accusatory looks (like Hermione) or peppering him with questions on how he had submitted his name into the Goblet (like Fred and George) or just generally insulting him (like almost everyone else in the school!).

Classes were a nightmare. Ron no longer wanted to sit next to him. He tried to pretend that he didn't mind sitting by himself but he didn't think he was fooling anyone. The teachers were snappy with him. Professor Sprout was particularly cold, which Harry thought was to be expected since she was Diggory's head of house. But, the other teachers were also sharp with him, thinking that he had disobeyed Dumbledore and put his name into the Goblet. By learning to wait a beat before responding, Harry was able to keep his temper under control.

He had had some practice in biting his tongue during summer breaks. The restaurant owner where he was a busboy was a blustery man who berated his workers whenever he was stressed. He made up for it at other times by trying to be kind. One of the reasons Harry was always welcomed back each summer was that the restaurant had a hard time retaining employees because of the owner's difficult nature.

Among the teachers, only Hagrid accepted Harry's word that he hadn't placed his own name in the Goblet. Hagrid wondered who could have placed the boy's name in the Goblet instead and was inclined to believe that it was a practical joke by another student that had gotten out of hand. While Harry didn't agree with Hagrid's explanation, he knew that he would never forget the gamekeeper's loyalty to him.

Harry continued to be suspicious of the adults around him. Someone had put his name into the Goblet. It hadn't gotten there by itself! With plenty of time on his hands now that he was a pariah in the school, Harry spent hours in the library researching each adult on his list. The list contained the names of all of the Hogwarts teachers, with the headmaster's name topping the chart. Also on the list were Madame Maxime and Igor Karkaroff. For good measure, Harry had thrown in

the names of the Ministry officials present the night his name had come spinning out of the Goblet, Barty Crouch and Ludo Bagman.

As a Triwizard champion, he was permitted access to the restricted section of the library. He poured over history books, looking for any clues that might help. He knew that Madam Pince, the librarian, viewed him with suspicion. He suspected that she reported his activities to Dumbledore.

Harry had known from his first day on the Hogwarts Express, when he had read Dumbledore's wizard card in his first Chocolate Frog, that Dumbledore was known for his alchemy work with Nicolas Flamel, for discovering the twelve uses of dragon blood, and for his defeat of the Dark Wizard, Grindewald. Now, Harry read every book and article he could find on the headmaster. While he found much of the information interesting, he was most intrigued by the historical accounts of Dumbledore's battle with Grindewald.

Intellectually, Harry had known, of course, that Voldemort was not the first evil villain in the world. But, somehow reading about one of his predecessors brought this truth home to Harry in a more meaningful way. He wondered whether Dumbledore had thought it was his fate to defeat Grindewald in the same way that it was his, Harry's, fate to conquer Voldemort. Maybe they had more in common than Harry had realized. He wished that there was more information about Dumbledore's personal life in the books.

Harry found Grindewald, himself, to be a fascinating character. He had gained power not through threats, but through promises of improving the world. Grindewald had preached that wizards were superior to muggles and it was in the best interests of the muggles themselves to have the wizards rule. "For the Greater Good." It was Harry's first exposure to domination through political manipulation rather than force.

Eventually, the wizarding world had realized the true horror of Grindewald's plan to have wizards rule over the rest of the world. Then, Dumbledore had defeated Grindewald, and had been hailed as

a hero. Harry smiled in grim satisfaction. He too would be hailed as a hero in time.

It was hard to believe that Dumbledore was the person who had placed Harry's name in the Goblet. Why would he have done so? True, Harry didn't trust Dumbledore. But, not because he thought Dumbledore was evil. On the contrary -- Dumbledore had shown himself to be a leader of the opposition to forces of darkness. But, Dumbledore didn't necessarily have Harry's best interests at heart.

What about the other adults? Igor Karkaroff had been reputed to be a Death Eater during Voldemort's reign. That certainly made him a prime suspect. But, shockingly, Severus Snape had also been rumored to be a Death Eater! Whoa! Harry vowed to keep a very close eye on both of these gentlemen. He wouldn't trust anyone completely (even Hagrid), but he didn't really seriously suspect some of them. After all, it was hard to imagine that Barty Crouch, Ludo Bagman, or Professors Moody, McGonagall, Sprout, Flitwick or a number of the other teachers would have submitted his name to the Goblet.

Meanwhile, at the urging of Draco Malfoy, many of the students started sporting buttons that read "Support Cedric Diggory, the REAL Hogwarts champion". When passing Harry in the hallways or in class, when teachers weren't looking, they would press the badge and it would flash "TWIST STINKS". Harry tried not to let anyone see how devastating he found this.

A few days before the first task, Harry was called along with the other champions to a small classroom. First, Ollivander weighed everyone's wands. Then, the Daily Prophet took some pictures. The reporter, Rita Skeeter, spent most of her time flirting with Viktor and Cedric. Harry was thankful that the whole proceeding seemed to go fairly smoothly. However, he realized that he had been far too optimistic when the Daily Prophet article arrived a few days later.

The paper blared the headline "Twist-ed Triwizard Tournament," with a smaller font headline, "Muggleborn Steals Champions' Spotlight." With a sinking heart, Harry began reading the article.

Hogwarts seems to be becoming a hotbed of trickery and deceit. Who can forget that, only last year, Hogwarts housed the imposter claiming to be Harry Potter? And, now, the prestigious Triwizard Tournament has been infiltrated by a muggleborn, Mark Twist, who mysteriously was able to submit his name into the Goblet of Fire. He competes against the legitimate champions: the famous Seeker Viktor Krum representing Durmstrang, the lovely Beauxbaton contender, Fleur Delacour, and our own Cedric Diggory, whose father is a Ministry official. Readers may wonder how this muggleborn usurper could have been permitted to hoodwink the Goblet of Fire, under Albus Dumbledore's very nose. Perhaps, his detractors are correct in stating that Dumbledore is becoming senile.

Classmates of Mark Twist have reported that the boy is a parseltongue, an ability known to be a trait of Dark Wizards, including, most famously, You-Know-Who. The boy has also been linked to the mysterious escape last year of Sirius Black, the notorious killer. We solemnly urge the Ministry to keep a close watch over the Triwizard Tournament. With such a competitor in its midst, we can only hope that the champions are not in danger.

Harry crumbled the paper in his hands and threw it into a fireplace. He was surprised to feel tears pool in his eyes. How could he let such a poison pen hurt him? he demanded of himself.

What should he do? He was the one in danger and yet that horrible reporter accused him of being a threat to the other champions. He! Harry Potter! He was the hero! Oh, how he wished there was someone in whom he could confide.

Harry wondered whether he should tell everyone he was really Harry Potter. Surely, this hostility would end. They would believe the Boy-Who-Lived, wouldn't they? They would realize that he hadn't put his name into the Goblet. But, Voldemort was regaining power. He knew it. His scar prickled almost constantly now. If he was in danger as Mark Twist, he would be even more so as Harry Potter, wouldn't he?

Let me just get through the first task, he thought to himself. I'll decide then. If this doesn't improve, I'll speak with Dumbledore. I'll tell him who I really am and let him decide whether I should continue my

masquerade. Having made the decision, Harry was surprised to find a new calm descend upon him. Having a plan made all the difference, he thought.

The weekend before the first task, Hagrid whispered to Harry during class to meet him at night, and to try not to be seen. Meeting him as requested, Hagrid led the boy in secret to a clearing to show him the dragons being prepared for the first task. It was clear that Hagrid thought the four beasts were glorious but Harry felt nothing but tremendous terror. He forced himself to concentrate as Hagrid questioned Ron's brother, Charlie, who was one of the men handling the dragons. Charlie told Hagrid that he thought that the triwizard champions would be expected just to get past the dragons, not to fight them. Harry wondered whether he was supposed to feel grateful.

He stumbled away from the clearing. He returned to the castle in such a daze that, when he looked up at the entrance door, he wondered how he had arrived there. He didn't recall his trip back from the dragon enclosure at all.

There were a number of students mulling around outside the castle, enjoying the mild night. A few groups deliberately turned their backs on Harry as he passed. One boy actually spat on the ground at his own feet clearly wishing he could spit at Harry instead. Harry stared at the boy in bewilderment his eyes unfocused. But, he was distracted by the deep rumble of a voice he recognized as Viktor Krum's.

Looking in the direction of the voice, he saw the three champions huddled together, chatting. It was almost as if his thoughts had conjured them up from thin air. Harry walked toward them, with jerky steps. When they noticed him, their eyes hardened and Fleur's mouth pursed into disapproving lines. Harry was reminded briefly of his Aunt Petunia.

"Dragons," he panted. "The first task is for us to get past a dragon. One for each of us." He barely registered their looks of shock, followed by fear, before he turned and stumbled away.

He changed his mind about entering the castle. He didn't think he could stand meeting with any more hostility at the moment. Instead, not worrying about curfew, he headed toward the Dark Lake. As he drew closer, he started to run; as if, by running, he could outdistance his fear. He arrived at the lake gasping for breath. His gasps turned into heaves. He fell to his knees and was sick behind a copse close to the water. It took some time to calm himself. But, eventually, the quiet laps of the water on the edge of the lake, and the balmy night air helped to soothe him. He wiped the wetness from his face, whether tears or perspiration, he didn't know.

"Stop it," he told himself sternly. "You want to be a hero, don't you? Yet, you run scared at the first test! You don't see Viktor, Fleur or Cedric here, do you? No. They're scared too but they're coping."

"Yes," said a small voice in his head. "But they're three years older and they chose to be in this tournament."

"But, I'm the one destined to be the savior," he reminded himself. "How am I going to face Voldemort if I turn into a sniveling baby when I see a dragon? Have some pride, man!"

The cold from the ground was seeping into his bones. Reluctantly, he rose and headed back to the castle. He modified his glamour charm so that Mark Twist's face was not puffy or blotchy. He didn't want anyone to know that he had been distressed. It was late. He didn't pass many students and he ignored those he met.

He ran into Professor Moody, who looked at him intently. Harry wondered if the professor could tell he had been crying. "Are you okay, Twist?" Moody asked kindly.

"Yes, sir," said Harry softly and made to continue down the hall.

Moody laid a hand on the teenager's shoulder, to halt his progress. "I'm here to help you, boy, anytime you want. Why don't you come with me and we'll talk about what's ahead? Nothing is ever as frightening if you have someone to share your worries with."

“Thank you, Professor,” said Harry calmly. He was amazed at his own acting ability. Inside, he felt like screaming, “Help me!” But, on the outside, he maintained a steady gaze and lied, “I’m fine. But, I am tired. I better go up to bed.” And, with a tiny shrug, he dislodged Moody’s hand and continued down the corridor. He knew Moody’s eyes followed him until he turned the corner – maybe even after.

How he wished he could confide in the Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher. But, he couldn’t trust anyone.

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The next morning, at breakfast, Harry watched the other champions surreptitiously. How were they handling the news that they’d be fighting dragons? While they each seemed a little quieter and more pale than usual, none of them behaved differently as far as Harry could tell. “Sure,” he thought, resentfully, “Cedric probably has an arsenal of spells he knows he can use. Fleur will just fling back her silvery hair and make the dragon her love slave. And, Krum, he’ll probably just fly past the dragon.”

Harry froze. Wait! That was a good idea! He could fly past the dragon, too. Would that be allowed? Could he take a broom? He’d have to ask Madam Hooch if he could borrow one of the school’s brooms. Maybe he could try some of them out and see which one was fastest.

Impatient to start, he abruptly got up from the table, leaving most of his breakfast untouched. He didn’t notice the curious glances he received from the other students and teachers. He spent the rest of the day practicing his flying. It was a welcome break from the unrelenting stress he had been under. When Harry rose in the air, he felt as if a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He wished he could fly forever.

He looked into the distance, past the rolling hills, the Dark Lake, and the Forbidden Forest. What wouldn’t he give to be able to just take this broom and keep on flying. He would fly to a world where they had never heard of a Triwizard Tournament, Voldemort or Harry Potter. He would start a new life there and, someday, he’d have a wife and

kids. He'd commute every day to work in some office where everyone complained about the boss. He would have the most boring life – it would be wonderful!

“Twist!” Shaken from his daydreams, Harry looked down. Madam Hooch was signaling for him to come down. Startled, Harry realized that it had gotten late. He had missed lunch and, if he didn't hurry, would miss dinner, too. Not that he minded too much. He hated entering the Great Hall and feeling the wave of dislike directed at him.

He returned to earth and thanked Madam Hooch for letting him use the school brooms. He asked whether he could reserve one for use on Tuesday, the day of the first task. She assured him that this would be fine; she looked curious, but didn't ask any questions.

Harry's steps slowed as he approached the Great Hall. After the joy of flying, he couldn't bear to face his classmates and feel the familiar knotting in his stomach. But, he was getting hungry. He had eaten very little breakfast and no lunch at all. Vaguely recalling that Fred and George had once mentioned how to enter the kitchens, Harry decided to try his luck with the house elves instead.

Harry avoided looking into anyone's eyes as he passed them in the corridors. From time to time, he saw the flash of a “Twist Stinks” button out of the corner of his eyes. The hallways became more deserted as he neared the entrance to the kitchens. Remembering the twins' instructions, he ticked a pear in the picture of a great fruit-bowl. It giggled and turned into a door handle. Turning the handle, Harry stepped slowly inside.

There were dozens of house elves hurrying around, preparing the dinnertime meal. Harry looked around in amazement. He hadn't realized how elaborate the kitchens were. A huge fireplace took up almost an entire wall. Pots and pans hung everywhere. Four long wooden tables, positioned exactly beneath the four house tables above, in the Great Hall, were piled high with food, waiting to be sent up through the ceiling to their twin tables above. The hum of activity filled the room.

Harry started to back out of the room. It was so busy right now, he had no right to disturb the elves. But, before he could leave, he heard a familiar high pitched voice call his name. "Mark Twist! Sir!"

And, to his surprise, there was Dobby! The elf, looking odd in mismatched but clean clothing, was beaming at him. Harry realized how much he missed having people look at him with welcome in their eyes. "Hi, Dobby. What are you doing here?"

"Dumbledore hired me, sir! Dobby is a free elf and Dobby wants paying now. It was hard to find work but Dumbledore said Dobby could work here. Dobby gets a Galleon a week and one day off a month!"

"That's what Dumbledore offered?" asked Harry in disapproval. It didn't sound very fair.

"No, sir. Dumbledore offered Dobby ten Galleons a week and weekends off. Dobby had to bargain him down. Dobby is a free elf but Dobby isn't wanting too much. He likes work better. Dobby has been hoping to see you, sir. Dobby has been wanting to thank you again for helping to set him free!"

"Oh, you're welcome, Dobby. No one deserves to be abused. I know."

Dobby looked at Harry intently. "Yes," he said, slowly, "Dobby thinks you do know, sir." There was an awkward silence.

"But, why are you here, sir?" asked Dobby finally.

"I can come back another time. I didn't realize how busy it would be at dinnertime. I'm just hungry and I was hoping I could grab a small bite, perhaps. I...I didn't want to eat in the Great Hall tonight."

Dobby eyed him knowingly and Harry wondered if the house elves knew about the four champions. Probably. But Dobby, at least, didn't seem to hold it against him.

“Dobby would be honored to get you food, sir. Please wait here just one moment. Dobby will return right away.”

And, within a very short time, Dobby was pressing a large sandwich into Harry’s hands and giving him a bag filled with desserts for later.

“Thank you, Dobby. I really appreciate it,” said Harry gratefully.

“Anytime, sir. Mark Twist is always welcome here. You are a great friend to house elves.”

Harry smiled and gulped deeply. After all the hatred directed his way recently, it was warming to see the look of adoration on Dobby’s face. Harry backed out of the room quickly, before he disgraced himself by crying. “I’ll turn into a watering can, if I don’t watch it,” he thought. “A simple thank you from Dobby and I’m about to start bawling. Pathetic.”

But, Harry’s spirits lifted considerably after seeing Dobby. He was able to ignore the continued ridicule from his fellow students over the next few days by reminding himself that, one day, they would look at him with admiration, the way Dobby did.

Feeling slightly better, Harry changed his approach in dealing with his detractors. Whenever someone insulted him, Harry would look the student directly in the eye, chin lifted, with a calm expression on his face. He would not say a word but, silently, to himself, he’d repeat his mantra, “I am a hero – your hero. One day, you will be sorry that you treated me this way.” Most students found Harry’s behavior alarming and Harry noticed a decrease in the number of insults thrown his way.

Draco Malfoy, as always, was an exception. When Harry stared directly at him after Draco had flashed his “Twist Stinks” button, Draco had challenged, “What’s the matter, Twist? Do you have something to say?”

“No,” said Harry calmly. “I have nothing to say to you.”

Draco was infuriated at the dismissal. "I'm looking forward to seeing you make a fool of yourself, Twist. Whatever the first task is, the other champions will leave you in the dust – where you belong!"

Harry refused to respond, but continued to stare steadily at Draco. Disconcerted, the other boy pretended that Pansy Parkinson was signaling to him and he walked away. Harry noticed Professor Moody watching him. Forestalling any continued attempts by the teacher to speak with him, Harry quickly retreated.

The day of the first task dawned bright and clear. Harry woke up instantly alert but not immediately remembering why he had a vague sense of dread gnawing at the edges of his mind. When memory came flooding back, he felt his blood run cold and his bones disintegrate. He waited until his roommates left before climbing out of bed. He didn't want them to see him shaking.

Deciding that he needed to calm down, Harry skipped breakfast to sit by the Dark Lake again. He wondered if he would ever sit by this lake again. Maybe, today would be his last. Maybe the dragon would succeed in killing him. "No!" he said angrily, climbing to his feet. "I will not die today. I don't even know why I'm afraid. I have to kill Voldemort. Whoever put my name in the Goblet is mistaken if they think anything is going to stop me. I will kill Voldemort – it is my destiny!"

And, letting his anger help fuel his courage, Harry made his way down to the stadium where the first task was to be held. He sidetracked briefly to take the broom he intended to use out of the school equipment shed, leaning it against the outside. He hoped that it would obey his command to come when the time was right. Giving it a last pat, he entered the tent where the champions were to wait for the task to begin. The other champions were already there.

Ludo Bagman called the champions together and explained that they would each have to retrieve a golden egg that had been placed in a nest protected by a dragon. Each champion put their hand into a bag, pulling out a model of the dragon he or she would face. Each model had a number indicating the order they were to take on the dragons. Harry was to go last, facing the Hungarian Horntail, the most vicious

of the dragons. He knew that everyone in the tent was watching him intently, trying to see if he was regretting having put his name in the Goblet yet. He schooled his face to maintain an indifferent expression. He was not going to give them the satisfaction of seeing that he was afraid.

Waiting for his turn was among the hardest things Harry had ever had to do. He couldn't see but he could hear the commentary as the other champions faced their dragons. Harry wondered if he would run screaming from the tent when it was his turn.

Finally, he heard the whistle blow signaling his turn. The signal hit him like a blow, even though he had just spent the last hour anticipating this moment. "I am a hero. I am a hero," he repeated silently to himself.

Slowly, he entered the stadium. The crowds were a blur of color. There were too many people, and he was too frightened, to recognize anyone he knew. The sound was deafening. He couldn't tell whether the crowd was booing or cheering. He was glad – he didn't think he could handle boos just now.

There, in front of him, was the Hungarian Horntail. It was enormous! It opened its mouth to roar and belch fire. Harry was transfixed by the number of razor sharp teeth – each as large as a full grown man. The creature swished its tail angrily and Harry noticed the spike sticking out of it. His mouth dry and his hands sweating profusely, Harry lifted his wand and said, in a shaky voice, "Accio school broom!"

After a short wait that seemed like an eternity to Harry, the broom came whizzing through the sky to hover in front of him. Harry had to wipe his palms on his robe in order for them to be dry enough to grip the broom handle. Then, with a kick to the ground, he lifted off.

Almost at once, Harry felt the familiar thrill that flying always brought. He could do this! He could! He just needed to get that dragon to move to the side and he'd be able to retrieve the egg. Carefully, maneuvering the creature away from the nest through a series of intricate dives and evasions, Harry was able to lure the dragon away from the egg. In a surprisingly short time, Harry put his broom into a

steep dive, pulling up at the last possible moment to sweep past the nest and capture the egg. Once he felt its weight in his arms, he sped up and rose into the air again. When he was sure he had cleared the dragon's reach, Harry landed lightly and held up the egg for all to see.

He couldn't help grinning broadly in relief. And, now that the switch in his brain let in sound again, he realized that he was hearing cheers. Even if everyone thought that he had put his name in the Goblet, they were impressed. He heard Bagman, commentating, say "Great Scott, that boy can fly! Did you see this, Mr. Krum? What a performance!"

Professor McGonagall, who had come to meet him when he got off the broom, was saying, "That was excellent, Twist!" And, then she burst out, as if she couldn't help herself, "Are you sure you won't reconsider being on the Gryffindor Quidditch team?"

Harry smiled and shook his head. He looked around the crowded stadium, filled with cheering people. This is it! he thought exultantly. This is what it will be like when I defeat Voldemort for good. Only it will be even better then! They will cheer for me and everyone will love me. This is where I am meant to be!

The cheers died down when the judges' scores were read. Harry received the second highest marks; he wouldn't have cared if he had come in last. He was just so happy it was over.

And, the best thing was that Ron and Hermione were his friends again. Hermione came running up to him and threw her arms around his neck. "Oh, Mark! You could've been killed!"

Ron was right behind her, his face pale. "That was bloody brilliant, mate!" he breathed. "I think you were crazy to put your name in the Goblet, but maybe you actually have a chance to win. I...I'll be rooting for you!"

Harry didn't know how to react. He had missed his friends so much, he didn't want to fight with them anymore. It was clear that Ron, at least, was not going to believe that Harry hadn't submitted his own name into the Goblet. But, at least he wasn't angry about it anymore.

Ron was apparently willing to be friends even believing Harry had lied to him.

Hermione finished hugging her friend and stepped back. "We're sorry we weren't there for you, Mark. We were angry with you, but not anymore. We just want you to get through this in one piece!"

Ron added. "No. I want him to win!" and he smiled at Harry. Harry realized that his was as close to an apology as he would receive.

Swallowing his disappointment that they still thought him a liar, he smiled back and said, "I'm with Hermione. I just want to come out of this alive!"

Ron slapped him on the back and Hermione hugged him again. It felt so good to have his friends back.

Harry flipped a mental finger at whoever had put his name in the Goblet. "Hah!" he thought triumphantly. "I made it through the first task. You didn't kill or humiliate me, if that was your plan."

Thank goodness the second task wasn't until February!

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Chapter Seventeen – Year Four; The Second Task

After Harry's triumph at the first task, he found the other students slightly warmer to him. Sure, there were some, like Draco Malfoy, who continued to flash "Twist Stinks" buttons whenever they passed him. But, many stopped being overtly hostile. And a few even started to be friendly again. The teachers, too, were less challenging. Harry was immensely grateful.

Feeling more confident, Harry decided not to reveal his identity to Dumbledore. He would continue with his masquerade and hope that the worst was behind him. He could always change his mind if the situation worsened, he reasoned.

A few weeks after the first task, Professor McGonagall asked Harry to remain after class, where she explained that the champions were expected to choose partners to lead the dancing at the Yule Ball. Harry was horrified. He didn't know how to dance. And, worse, who would go with him to the ball?

At lunch, Harry glanced over at Cho Chang. Could he gather up the nerve to ask her? But, at that moment, she looked up and noticed him watching her. Harry smiled tentatively at her, but she didn't smile back. She turned away to speak with one of the Beauxbatons students sitting next to her.

Harry felt a horrible pitching feeling in his stomach. He turned back to his food and pushed his plate away.

"Are you finished, already?" asked Ginny, who was sitting across the table from him. "You barely ate."

"I'm not very hungry," Harry said.

"Are you feeling okay?"

Harry looked at Ginny and nodded. "At least Ginny doesn't hate me," he thought. "Maybe I should ask her to go to the dance with me."

Before he could chicken out, Harry popped the question. "Ginny. Would you go the Yule Ball with me?"

Her eyes widened and she looked surprised. She hesitated a moment, during which time Harry died a thousand deaths, before saying, "Sure, Mark. I'd like to go with you. Thanks for asking."

Harry let out a breath he hadn't even realized he was holding. "That's great! Thanks," he said. What a relief!

The gossip that Mark Twist was taking Ginny Weasley to the Yule Ball spread quickly. Draco Malfoy intercepted them as they were leaving the Great Hall. "Weaselette! How could you sink so low? I know that your brother is friends with the lying, cheating mudblood, but how could you go to the Ball with him?"

"Keep your opinions to yourself, Malfoy!" snapped Ginny. "Mark is very brave and I'm glad to be going with him."

Draco opened his mouth to say more, but Harry stepped forward. In a strong, composed voice, he said, "That's enough! Don't insult Ginny again. I'm warning you."

Draco took a step back. "You're threatening me? You think because you're a Triwizard champion that you're some hot stuff? You don't scare me, Twist. You're just a show-off."

Harry fought to keep his cool. "I'm not threatening you. I'm telling you. Leave Ginny alone. I won't tell you again."

"Disgusting mudblood!" Draco said, but he turned and walked out of the Great Hall.

"Thanks, Mark," smiled Ginny, touching Harry's arm lightly.

Harry turned to her, unsmiling. "I'm sorry, Ginny. I didn't think. I shouldn't have asked you to go to the Yule Ball with me."

"Why not?" she asked, upset.

“You may have noticed,” said Harry sarcastically, “that I’m not the most popular person in Hogwarts at the moment. Malfoy won’t be the only one who will think you are ...fraternizing with the enemy.”

“I don’t care what Malfoy or anyone else says. I know that you are a good person, Mark. I’m proud to go with you to the Ball.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes. You asked me and I said yes. It’s too late to change your mind.”

Harry smiled, pleased. “I don’t want to change my mind. Thanks, Ginny.”

She blushed.

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The Yule Ball passed uneventfully for the most part. Ron ended up going with Padma Patil. He had thought to go with Hermione, but he had waited until the last minute to ask her. To his surprise, she turned him down, since she had already promised to go with someone else. Ron was beyond furious when Hermione entered the Ball on the arm of Viktor Krum.

Harry tried to stay out of the way of his feuding friends. Instead, he spent much of the Ball dancing with Ginny or just sitting quietly and chatting with her and some of their other friends. He noticed some glares directed their way, but no one said anything insulting. Perhaps, they were afraid to be overheard by the many teachers present. Harry didn’t care. He was just glad that he could enjoy the night.

Once the Ball was over, Harry turned his attention to preparing for the second task. He hated to think about the tournament, and had let weeks pass without working on the clue contained within the golden egg he had retrieved from the dragon’s nest. Realizing that he could procrastinate no longer, Harry spent hours trying to decipher the

terrible screeching sound that filled the air whenever he opened the egg. He tried any number of spells, but nothing seemed to work.

A few weeks before the second task, just as Harry was starting to panic, Cedric cornered him on his way to class one day. He thanked Harry for having warned him about the dragon and, in repayment, told him to take his egg to the prefects' bathroom. Harry didn't understand but was desperate enough to give anything a try. So, one night when he expected everyone else to be at dinner, Harry visited the prefects' bathroom as Cedric had suggested.

Harry enjoyed playing in the bath for a while. It was really like a small swimming pool, but with fragrant bubbles. He thought it was probably a good thing that he wasn't a prefect. He'd spend all his time in the bath and shrivel away. After a long time, he finally remembered why he was there and retrieved the egg from the side of the bath, where he had left it. He opened the egg but the same horrible screeching sound filled the room.

"I'd try putting it in the water, if I were you."

It was Moaning Myrtle. She had so surprised Harry that he had dropped the egg and swallowed a big gulp of soapy water. "Myrtle! I'm not dressed!"

"I closed my eyes when you got in," she said.

Harry wasn't sure he believed her. "You haven't been to see me for ages," she complained.

"I'm sorry, Myrtle. I didn't mean to ignore you. I don't want to just barge into the bathroom when you might not be in the mood for company. And, I'm not very popular around here. If you are serious about getting together, maybe you and I can schedule a time – but now's a bit awkward. Okay?"

Myrtle smiled. "It would be fun to have company. Most people don't like to spend time with a ghost. I like you. Tell you what, I'll leave you

now and give you privacy. Open the egg under the water and you'll hear the clue. It's a merpeople song. They live in the Dark Lake."

"Thanks, Myrtle!" called Harry as she disappeared into a pipe. Making a mental note to set a time to visit the ghost, Harry turned his attention to the egg. As directed, he held the egg under water and the screeching turned into an eerie song.

"Come seek us where our voices sound,

We cannot sing above the ground,

And while you're searching, ponder this:

We've taken what you'll sorely miss,

An hour long you'll have to look,

And to recover what we took,

But past an hour – the prospect's black

Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."

The clue seemed to indicate that he would have to be able to stay underwater for an hour. Well that should be easy enough. Gillyweed should do the trick, although it might be hard to find some. He would have to send away to the Diagon Alley for a supply.

Musing about the clue, Harry returned slowly to the Gryffindor common room. It had become second nature to him to pull out the Marauders' Map to check who was wandering the halls. Where possible, Harry tried to avoid running into students. However, in looking at the map tonight, Harry was stopped in his tracks. Why was Bartemius Crouch in Professor Snape's office? Harry recalled the stern face of the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Why was he visiting Snape?

Harry continued heading back to his rooms. He recalled that, in his research on Mr. Crouch, he learned Mr. Crouch's son had been convicted of being a Death Eater and had been sent to Azkaban, where he had died. Crouch Sr. had denounced his own son. In the articles, the older man seemed so passionately against the Dark Arts. But, what if he were lying? What if his son was a Death Eater because he had learned such principles from his father? Harry recalled the events of the Quidditch World Cup this last summer. Mr. Crouch had been instrumental in organizing that event and it had ended in Death Eaters marching and a Dark Mark cast into the sky. Was Crouch Sr. really a Death Eater too? And was that why he was visiting Professor Snape, who was also a known Death Eater?

Harry's scar gave a painful twinge, reminding him of the growing threat. It was very unlikely that it was a coincidence that Voldemort was growing stronger, Harry's name had been submitted into the Goblet of Fire, and known Death Eaters were consorting together. Harry shivered. He really could trust no one. Even a high level Ministry official was suspect.

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The day of the second task was clear and cold. Harry found a quiet corner in the library to pass the time before he would need to make his way to the Dark Lake. His stomach was in knots and he didn't want to hear any comments from the other students. He wasn't sure what would be worse. Comments from students like Draco, who would try to undermine his confidence by telling him that he was going to fail, or comments from friends like Ron, who would tell him that he was going to win.

When he judged the time to be right, he joined the rest of the school at the Dark Lake. He tried to hide his nervousness by keeping his face impassive. He didn't realize that, once again, he gave an impression of hauteur and arrogance. He would have been shocked had he realized that Draco, staring at him with dislike, thought that Harry reminded him of his father. It infuriated Draco that a muggleborn would carry himself with the same regal bearing as the noblest of purebloods.

Harry arrived at the landing where the other champions and judges were waiting. He noticed that Percy, Ron's brother, was there. He recalled, vaguely, that Percy worked for Barty Crouch. Harry looked around but didn't see Mr. Crouch and he guessed that Percy was there in his stead. Harry wondered, fleetingly, where Mr. Crouch was.

Ludo Bagman explained the rules. "Champions, you have one hour to retrieve what has been taken from you. One...two...three!" He blew his whistle and cheers from the watching audience filled the air. The noise was muffled since the crowd was packed into seats on the opposite bank, in stands that had been erected where the dragons' enclosure had been months before.

Harry pulled off his socks, shoes and robe and stuffed Gillyweed into his mouth. He walked into the freezing water and, within moments, felt the Gillyweed take effect. Harry felt a sharp pain on either side of his neck and realized that he had sprouted gills. Submerging himself fully into the water, he took a deep breath and enjoyed the feel of the oxygen filling his lungs. He started swimming, which was made easier by the webbing that had appeared on his hands and feet.

The silence of the water was eerie. He swam for a long time, easily evading Grindylows. Finally, after almost a half an hour, Harry heard the merpeople singing and followed their voices to their village. When he entered the village, he found a crowd of merpeople gathered around four people tied to the tail of a merperson statue.

Harry's mouth dropped open in shock. There were Ron, Hermione, Cho and a little girl who closely resembled Fleur Delacour. The words of the egg's clue came back to Harry: "We've taken what you'll sorely miss." Never would he have guessed that this meant that the merpeople had taken human hostages. And, then, his blood running cold, Harry remembered more of the song: "But past an hour – the prospect's black; Too late, it's gone, it won't come back."

The people would die if the champions didn't recover them in time! Harry looked around frantically. Where were the other champions?

Harry grabbed a jagged rock and started hacking at the ropes binding Hermione. The merpeople pulled him back and one of them said, "You take your own hostage, only."

"No way," said Harry. "I'm not leaving any of them!"

Before the merpeople could continue arguing, Cedric appeared. He had used the bubble-headed charm and looked like a strange scuba diver. He quickly cut Cho loose with a knife that he had in his pocket. Then, pulling her upwards, they disappeared.

Viktor Krum, who had transformed his head into a shark, appeared soon after. He started biting at Hermione's ropes with his shark teeth. Harry was worried that he'd hurt Hermione and he pressed the rock into Viktor's hand. Within moments, Viktor had used the rock to cut through the ropes and pull Hermione to safety.

Harry waited for Fleur to arrive, but time passed and she didn't appear. Becoming anxious, Harry took the stone and cut through the ropes holding both Ron and the little girl. When the merpeople tried to stop him, he pulled out his wand and held it before him in a threatening pose. He held up three fingers and slowly lowered them one at a time. When he put down the second finger, the merpeople scattered.

Pulling both Ron and the little girl toward the surface was exhausting. Harry felt his legs cramping and his shoulders ached with the weight he was carrying. As he got close to the surface, his flippers disappeared and his gills sank back into the sides of his neck. He could no longer breathe under water. He held his breath but started to feel dizzy. Just when he thought that he could not last another second, he broke the surface of the water. He took a long, deep reviving breath. The air filling his lungs felt so wonderful.

Ron and the little girl opened their eyes. The little girl looked around in confusion and seemed scared. Ron smiled at Harry and said, "I knew you'd be able to get me in time." Noticing the girl, he asked, "Why is she here? Fleur was supposed to get her. She's Fleur's sister."

“Fleur didn’t turn up. I couldn’t leave her.”

“You didn’t take that song seriously did you? Dumbledore wouldn’t have let any of us drown! I hope you didn’t waste time down there acting the hero.”

Harry jerked at the word “hero”. To himself, he thought, “But that’s what I am. I am the hero.” Out loud, he said, “I did take the song seriously. I wouldn’t trust Dumbledore or anyone else in this crazy world not to think it was okay to let a hostage drown. Anyway, come on. Help me get her to shore.”

Ron shook his head in disappointment that Harry had wasted time retrieving Fleur’s sister. But, obediently, he helped Harry tug the little girl to shore. Fleur met them at the bank, hysterical. “Gabrielle! Gabrielle! Is she alive? Is she hurt?”

Harry tried to say that the little girl was fine but he was too exhausted to speak.

When they reached the bank, Percy dragged his brother out of the water (“Gerroff, Percy, I’m all right!”) and Fleur hugged her sister tightly. “It was ze Grindylows...zey attacked me...oh, Gabrielle, I thought...I thought...” Turning suddenly to Harry, she kissed him twice on each cheek. “You saved ’er. Even though she was not your ’ostage. Thank you!”

Harry blushed. Fleur turned and also kissed Ron, thanking him for his help. Hermione looked furious.

Their attention was brought back to Ludo Bagman, whose magically enhanced voice rang out. “Ladies and gentlemen, we have reached our decision. Mer-chieftainess Murcus has told Professor Dumbledore that Mark Twist was first to reach the hostages but refused to leave until he was assured that all hostages would be safe. Dumbledore has argued that this shows tremendous moral fiber. With this in mind, we have awarded the following scores. Fleur Delacour - twenty-five points; Viktor Krum forty points; Mark Twist forty-five points; and Cedric Diggory forty-seven points.”

Harry couldn't believe it! These scores, combined with the scores from the first task, tied him for first place with Cedric!

"There you go, Mark. You weren't being thick after all – you were showing moral fiber," applauded Ron.

"The third and final task will take place at dusk on the twenty-fourth of June. The champions will be notified of what is coming, precisely one month beforehand. Thank you all for your support of the champions," finished Bagman.

Harry basked in the feeling of enormous relief. It was over and he had four months until he had to worry about the next task. He smiled and turned to follow Ron and Hermione back up to the castle. But, as he turned, he noticed Professor Dumbledore looking at him. Defiantly, Harry stared back. Refusing to take offense, Dumbledore smiled and inclined his head toward Harry, indicating approval. Harry hesitated. He might not trust the man, but he couldn't deny that he desired the headmaster's good opinion. Harry returned a small smile and gave a slight nod back.

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Chapter Eighteen – Year Four; The Third Task

Harry's bravery in trying to save all the hostages won him acceptance from most of the students. They grudgingly forgave him for having submitted his name into the Goblet and became generally cordial to the young boy.

The next few months seemed to promise a welcome lull for Harry. He intended to spend a lot of time practicing new jinxes and hexes in case they would come in handy for the next task. But, he wasn't particularly worried. The third task seemed far away and, best of all, it was the last one. He just had to get through that one more day, and this tournament would finally be over.

Unfortunately, Harry's piece of mind was disturbed by an unexpected revival in the public's interest in the home life of the missing Harry Potter. It started with an article published in the Daily Prophet, written by Harry's least-favorite journalist, Rita Skeeter. Harry had been eating breakfast when the owls had arrived with the morning mail, carrying copies of the Daily Prophet to those students who had a subscription. Hermione, who liked to know what was going on in the wizarding world, received her copy as always.

As she opened the paper, Ron looked over her shoulder and, seeing the headline, said loudly, "Hey! What's that about Harry Potter?" Students nearby looked up and Harry, who was sitting next to Ron almost choked on his pumpkin juice.

Seeing the interest of everyone near her, Hermione obligingly started to read the article aloud:

Harry Potter's Tragic Childhood Revealed

By Rita Skeeter

The Boy-Who-Lived may be lost but he is not forgotten. Ministry officials claim that they continue to search diligently for Harry Potter, who has been missing for close to four years. The trail has grown cold with the passage of time.

This reporter has done what any competent investigator should have done ages ago: I returned to the scene of the crime to search for clues. “What crime?” you ask. This reporter can now exclusively report that a foul crime was indeed committed. A crime that the Ministry hoped to conceal. A crime against the boy hailed by so many as the beacon who brought light to the world of darkness created by He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. For, this reporter has learned that Harry Potter was the victim of foul child abuse.

“What!” yelled Ron.

“Shhh!” said Dean. “Keep reading, Hermione!”

I spoke with Harry’s Aunt Petunia, sister of Lilly Potter. I wanted to know why a young boy would run away from home and whether his family had any ideas as to where he would have gone. What I learned was shocking indeed. In her own words, Petunia Dursley admitted, “I have no idea where that unnatural spawn went. And, I don’t want to know. I told him when I demanded he leave this house to just keep away from my family. I told him I wanted to forget he ever existed.”

Yes, everyone, Harry Potter did not run away, as has previously been assumed. Instead, he was kicked out of his home at the age of 10. As shocking as this is, the reason will be even more so. Why did Petunia Dursley, the natural protector of her orphaned nephew, turn her back on young Harry? Because, Petunia admitted, she had finally realized that Harry possessed magical ability. “When the boy apparated onto the school roof, I couldn’t hide from the truth any longer. We tried to beat it out of him for years, but it didn’t work. He was one of those foul creatures— a wizard!”

Fury filled in the air. “Stupid git!” “Evil b-tch!” were among the curses thrown about by the students. As Hermione read, more and more students clustered around to hear. Harry saw that similar pockets of students were grouped every few feet along the Gryffinder and other dining tables around the other Daily Prophet subscribers, who were also reading the article aloud. Harry, using a napkin to mop up the spilled pumpkin juice, tried to hide his expression. He felt sick and wasn’t sure why.

“Keep reading, Hermione,” urged Ginny.

What did she mean that they had tried to ‘beat it out of him for years’? Readers, be prepared for news that will upset all but the most cold-hearted. If you are reading this article to young children, you might wish to cover their ears at this point.

Petunia introduced me to her husband, Vernon -- a large, ugly man, with the same anti-wizard hatred as Harry’s aunt. Vernon bragged to me how he had beaten Harry for years. “At least once a week, often more, I would have to show that boy his place. I wouldn’t stop until my hand was aching. I did my duty by that child – no one can say I didn’t try. And, how many times did we lock him in his cupboard without food, Petunia? Countless. But none of that helped. He still turned the teacher’s hair blue.”

Lock him in his cupboard? Yes, that is what he said and that is what he meant. Harry Potter lived his childhood in a closet, readers. In this quaint muggle house, spotlessly clean, the Dursley’s own son has two rooms – one just for his broken toys. But, Harry was forced to live in a coat closet not fit for a house elf. (See sidebar for a picture of Harry’s bedroom.)

Why was this hater of all things magical raising the wizarding world’s golden boy? How could no one have known that Harry was being abused for almost ten years? Years during which he must have wondered why no one came to save him, as he had saved us from He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. The Ministry should be ashamed of itself!

Unfortunately, the Dursleys could not shed any light on where young Harry may have gone after he was so unconscionably thrown out of his home by his abusers. Wherever he is, we can only hope and pray that he is safer now than he was with his relatives.

Hermione laid down the paper. For a brief moment, there was silence and then all of her listeners spoke at once, except for Harry who kept silent.

“Can you believe that?” demanded Ron.

“What was the Ministry thinking in not checking up on him?” asked Hermione.

“I hope he’s okay, wherever he is,” said Ginny.

“My father gets a little shirty sometimes,” said Seamus, “but he’s a pussycat next to that Vernon Dursley fellow.”

“Makes me glad I don’t have a father,” said Dean.

Harry wanted to join in, so that his silence didn’t attract attention. But, he wasn’t sure he could trust his voice.

The memories of his years with the Dursleys were flooding back. He recalled, with a sick sensation, how he would wait anxiously each night to see if Vernon returned from work in a good mood or not. If the day had gone poorly, Harry knew that Vernon was likely to find some excuse to beat him. He hated the memory of how little control he had had over his life. It didn’t matter what he did; if Vernon wanted to find fault with him, he would. If Harry was in the room, why wasn’t he in the cupboard hiding his face away from decent people? If Harry tried to stay quietly in his cupboard, he was behaving unnaturally and needed to be punished for that as well.

Harry avoided looking at the photograph of the cupboard that had been his room at Number 4 Privet Drive. Ron was staring at it avidly. “I thought my room was small,” the redhead breathed in wonder. “I’m never complaining about the Burrow again!”

“This news is going to be devastating to the Ministry,” said Fred.

“What do you mean?” asked Dean.

“When everyone first learned that Harry Potter was missing, the Ministry was flooded by howlers and people demanding that heads roll. The news that Harry was abused for years without anyone finding out about it ...” began George.

“Add that to the fiasco with Andrew Danirson posing as Harry Potter for almost a year before people caught on.” Fred shook his head in disgust.

“The whole reason they wanted to hold the Triwizard Tournament this year was to distract everyone from the Danirson disaster,” continued Ron.

“What?!” Finally, Harry was jolted from his stupor.

Ron nodded. “Yup. Dad told us when we were home at Christmas break. The Ministry was getting such flak over not realizing that Danirson was an imposter, and letting almost a year go by without continuing to look for Potter, that they decided they needed some good public relations move. They hired a PR firm and the firm suggested that they bring back the Triwizard Tournament.”

Hermione said wisely, “I thought the timing was oddly suspicious. After all, the Triwizard Tournament hasn’t been held in centuries.”

Harry glanced up toward the staff table. Dumbledore was not there, but a number of the other teachers were sitting, breakfasts forgotten, with the Daily Prophet spread in front of them. All around, Harry saw people with serious expressions and pursed mouths. Where was Dumbledore? In his office, speaking with the Ministry about damage control?

Fred continued, “This news is coming at a very bad time for the Ministry. They are already facing a lot of heat for failing to find Bertha Jorkins.”

“Who’s Bertha Jorkins?” asked Harry and Hermione together.

“She’s a witch who works at the Ministry. She went off to Albania during the summer holidays and she hasn’t been heard from since.”

George said, snidely, “Let’s hope that the Ministry has more luck finding her than it has had in finding Harry Potter.”

Fred nodded. "It does seem that the Ministry is inept, doesn't it?"

Harry gave a weak smile. "Don't let Percy hear you say that!"

"Percy is a prat," said George, matter-of-factly.

"What do you think will happen now?" asked Hermione, giving the paper in her hand a little shake.

"It's bound to fuel a lot of anti-muggle sentiment," warned Ron.

"What do you mean?" asked Harry.

"People are going to be furious about what happened to Harry. They'll want to take it out on someone. They'll want to go after the Dursleys but I'm guessing that the Ministry will realize that and put them somewhere for their own safety. Next, they'll blame all muggles for what the Dursleys did."

"That's crazy," said Harry. "Not all muggles are like the Dursleys."

"I'm not disagreeing," said Ron. "I'm just saying that there are plenty of witches and wizards out there that will want to take revenge against the muggles as a group for what the Dursleys did to Potter."

Hermione nodded and said musingly, "You Know Who's supporters are going to exploit this."

"It's nuts!" burst out Harry. "You Know Who's supporters are probably jumping up and down with glee to know that Harry Potter was abused by his relatives."

Fred smirked cynically. "Yes. But, they'll pretend that they're appalled and use this," he tapped one finger on the Daily Prophet article, "to rile up everyone against muggles."

"What will happen to the Dursleys?" asked Hermione. "After all, they shouldn't be able to get away with what they did to Harry Potter."

“My guess is that they’ll be held for trial,” said George. “But, it’ll be kept quiet, or the Ministry will wait awhile.”

“What about Dumbledore?” asked Harry.

“What do you mean?” asked Ron.

“Er...” Harry cleared his throat. “I remember you saying that Dumbledore had placed Harry Potter with the Dursleys.”

Lee Jordan joined the conversation. “I’m sure that he’ll have some people angry at him, thinking that he should have done more to keep an eye on Harry. Actually, when he faced that inquiry a few years ago, I remember that the Daily Prophet reported that Dumbledore had asked a squib living in the neighborhood to keep an eye on Potter. No one realized that she had become batty and didn’t even know her own name, much less what was going on in Potter’s home.”

Harry was surprised to hear this. A squib had lived near him? He wondered who it was.

Lee went on. “Anyway, it wasn’t really Dumbledore’s place to keep an eye on Potter, was it? There was no will, so Harry naturally went to his closest living relatives. It’s really for the Ministry to make sure that no magical child, wizard or muggleborn, is being abused.”

Ron turned the subject, admiring his absent hero. “Can you believe that Harry was able to apparate at the age of 10? Cool, huh?”

“It was just accidental magic,” thought Harry. He didn’t realize he had spoken aloud until Fred answered.

“Accidental magic is one thing, Mark. Apparition is another. It takes tremendous focus and magical power to apparate. Harry Potter must be pretty special,” Fred agreed with Ron.

Harry burst out bitterly, “That didn’t stop him from being abused.”

Ron looked at him in surprise. "Mark, what do you think he could have done? He was just a kid."

"Yes," said Hermione, in disapproval. "Don't blame the victim, Mark."

Harry felt himself blush and muttered an apology. He wasn't quite sure who he was apologizing to. Himself? He left breakfast as soon as he could without attracting attention. He hoped that the furor over Harry Potter would die down soon.

True to Ron's prediction, the next weeks saw an upsurge in anti-muggle sentiment across the wizarding world. Fred said that his father had told him that it hadn't been as bad since You Know Who was at the height of his powers, riling up everyone with his pureblood rhetoric. The Ministry was stretched thin, looking for Harry Potter, responding to furious constituents, and trying to protect muggles throughout Great Britain who were being randomly attacked by angry wizards.

Harry found the renewed interest in Harry Potter disconcerting. He hated to be in the middle of a conversation, or reading a book, and hear the name Harry Potter. It always gave him an unpleasant swooping feeling in his stomach. He wondered constantly whether he should reveal his identity. He didn't want any muggles harmed in his name. But, every time he came close to deciding that he would give up his disguise, he reconsidered. His scar prickled almost every day and, at times, gave a painful throb, reminding him that Voldemort was lurking in the horizon.

One day, at Divination, Harry fell into a semi-trance, lulled by the heat and perfumed air. While in this state, he had a vision of Voldemort disciplining Wormtail, using his favorite: the cruciatus curse. "You're in luck, Wormtail. You are very fortunate indeed. Your blunder has not ruined everything. He is dead."

Harry had woken up to find himself lying on the floor, clutching his head, where his hidden scar felt as if a hot wire was pressing into it. "Are you okay, Mr. Twist?" asked Professor Trewlaney in concern.

"Yes, ma'am," Harry gasped. "Just a migraine. I...I get them from time-to-time. Can I go to the hospital wing?"

"Of course, dear."

Harry muttered a goodbye to Ron and left the classroom. Curious eyes followed him. Instead of going to the hospital wing, though, Harry returned to his dormitory and laid down on his bed. He took deep, soothing breathes. Eventually, his headache subsided and he pondered the vision he had seen. He didn't think there could be any doubt. Voldemort was definitely planning something. What? And, who was dead?

Harry had no answers. But, the vision of Voldemort and the occasional sharp pain in his scar kept him from revealing that he was Harry Potter. Instinctively, he felt that his best protection was remaining hidden. However, he spent endless hours practicing spell after spell. Ron and his other friends assumed that he was doing this to prepare for the last task. But, Harry spent his days and nights worrying about the rise of the Dark Lord.

On the day of the third task, Harry again skipped lunch, feeling vaguely ill from nerves. He found his familiar quiet corner of the library to try to relax. He knew that the other champions were spending time with their families, who were invited to watch the final task. Harry had explained that his parents were visiting his mother's sick sister, and would not be able to attend.

He was actually a bit relieved when it was time to join the other champions in front of the topiary maze that had been cultivated in preparation for this final task. He couldn't wait to start the task so that he would stop being nervous. He had already learned from the previous two tasks that the waiting for the task to begin was the most

difficult part. Once he was actually facing whatever danger lay in store, he was too focused on just survival to have any time to worry. Besides, the sooner he got through the task, the better. The tournament would finally be over.

The champions each entered the maze at staggered times. Cedric and Harry entered together, as they were tied for first place. When Harry stepped inside the maze, the huge hedge closed behind him, sealing off the watching crowds. It was eerie how the noise of the hundreds of students and teachers watching could be drowned out so completely by the magical hedge. Harry and Cedric soon split up and the young boy proceeded cautiously down the paths formed by the hedges, with his wand held out in front of him. He had learned a clever compass spell that helped keep him heading north, toward the center of the maze and the Triwizard Cup that had been placed there.

Harry was surprised that the dangers in the maze weren't worse. He came across a boggart pretending to be a dementor and a strange mist that turned him upside down until he forced himself to unstick his foot. But, the path was oddly clear of obstacles. Just then, Harry heard Fleur scream. "Fleur!" he called and ran in her direction. Turning a corner, he found himself facing a Blast-Ended Skrewt. Swearing, he backed away but the creature started crawling toward him, clicking its pincers menacing. Harry aimed for its underbelly, which he knew was one of the few spots where the creature's protective plating did not reach. "Impedimenta!" he yelled and the creature froze. Harry continued running in the direction where he had last heard Fleur.

Suddenly, parallel to his path, he heard Cedric yelling, "What are you doing? What the hell d'you think you're doing?"

And, then, Harry heard Krum's voice. "Crucio!"

Harry forced his way through the hedge separating him from Viktor and Cedric. Viktor saw Harry but, strangely, didn't try to curse the younger boy. Instead, he turned to run and Harry shouted, "Stupefy!"

Viktor fell and lay still on the ground. Harry hurried over to Cedric and helped him get up. "Are you all right?"

“Yeah,” he said weakly. “I can’t believe Viktor did that. I bet he got Fleur too. I heard her scream earlier.”

“I thought he was an okay guy, too. I hope Fleur’s okay.” Once again, Harry thought, you can’t trust anyone. Shaking his head in disbelief and disgust, he pointed his wand to the sky and shot up sparks for the teachers to find Viktor’s prone body.

“Well...I s’pose we’d better go on...” said Cedric, and the two boys split again.

Harry continued on, meeting a sphinx who posed a riddle before letting the boy pass. This was ridiculously easy, thought Harry. Up ahead, he saw the Triwizard Cup sitting on a raised platform. He started hurrying toward it but, coming out of the path in front of him, was Cedric. Cedric was going to reach it first.

Wait! There to his left, moving fast, was an enormous spider bearing down on Cedric. “Cedric! On your left!” warned Harry.

Cedric looked around and saw the spider. Jerking out of the way, he tripped and lost his wand. Harry tried to stop the spider, yelling “Stupefy” and “Impedimenta”. None of the spells had any effect other than to attract the spider’s attention and, turning from Cedric, the creature started to advance on the younger boy. He was lifted into the air and the spider opened its pincers. Harry was vaguely aware that Cedric was shouting “Stupefy” too but his spells had no more effect than Harry’s had had. “Expelliarmus,” he shouted in desperation. It worked – the spider dropped him and Harry fell twelve feet, one leg crumbling under him.

Together, he and Cedric yelled “Stupefy” and the combined spells finally stopped the spider. It keeled over and was still.

“Mark, are you alright?” asked Cedric.

Harry struggled to stand, using a hedge for support. His leg was in excruciating pain. He nodded toward the Triwizard Cup, gleaming on its supporting column. "Go on, Cedric. Take the Cup. It's yours."

Cedric looked toward the Cup, yearning in his eyes. "No. You deserve it. You were the one who told me about the dragons. You should have gotten more points for trying to save all of the hostages. I should have done that. You warned me about the spider just now."

Harry was becoming irritated. His leg hurt as if it were on fire and Cedric was standing here arguing about who should take the Cup. "Just take it, Cedric. You deserve it. I really don't want it anyway."

Cedric looked at Harry, confused. "What do you mean, you don't want it? If you didn't want it, why did you put your name into the Goblet of Fire?"

"As I've told everyone again and again, I didn't put my name into the Goblet. I never wanted to compete in this Tournament in the first place. It's been nothing but stress and it has not made me popular in the school, I can tell you."

Cedric smiled and shook his head in amazement. "I can't believe it. You really didn't put your name in the Goblet?"

"No. I really didn't," said Harry, as if speaking to a child.

Cedric didn't take offense. "I wonder who did your name in then."

"I wonder that, too," said Harry sarcastically.

Cedric laughed. "Well, anyway, you made it here and you deserve to take the Cup."

Rolling his eyes, Harry finally said, "Let's take it together. We'll tie for it."

"Are you sure?" asked Cedric, longing entering his voice again.

“Yeah. We’ve helped each other out, haven’t we? We both got here. Let’s take it together.”

A wide grin split Cedric’s face. “You’re on,” he said. “Come here.”

And, propping Harry up, Cedric helped him hop toward the platform where the Triwizard Cup was waiting. Each let a hand hover over one of the Cup’s handles and Harry said, “One – two – three –”

The boys both grasped a handle. Instantly, Harry felt a jerk in his stomach and an irresistible pull into a swirl of wind and color. His hand felt as if it were glued to the Cup. What was this? Some unexpected part of the tournament? It felt like an amusement park ride, where the riders were spun around until they felt dizzy and disoriented. The trip ended abruptly, when his feet slammed into the ground. He was able to unclench his hand from around the Cup handle. He was in agony over his leg and now his head felt dizzy too.

He looked up at Cedric and asked, groggily. “What was that?”

“A portkey,” said Cedric, looking in surprise at the Cup. “Did anyone tell you the Cup was a portkey?”

“What is a portkey?” asked Harry.

Looking around, Cedric explained quickly. “It’s an ordinary object that’s transformed to act as a transportation device. It will take you to wherever you want to go, if you cast the spell correctly. All portkeys must be registered with the Ministry. But, why send us here? Where are we?”

Harry looked around as well. They were standing in a graveyard. There was a hill to their left, with a beautiful manor house perched on top. Harry had his wand gripped tightly in his hand. He felt as if eyes were watching them. “Someone’s coming,” he warned Cedric.

A hooded figure approached carrying what looked like a bundle of rags. It stopped about six feet from them, in front of a marble headstone. Suddenly, Harry felt as if his head were being split in two.

Agony drove him to his knees. In the distance, he heard a cold, high voice say, "Kill the spare."

"Avada Kedvra!"

A glow of green light lit the night and Harry heard a thud. Harry retched from the pain in his head, which peaked and then slowly started to subside. Opening his streaming eyes, Harry saw Cedric, lying spread-eagled on the ground. He was dead.

Harry stared in shock into Cedric's dead eyes. No!

He barely realized that he was being pulled away and forced to stand against the headstone. Harry saw the name "Tom Riddle" in the wand-light, before he was pushed back against the headstone and ropes bound him to the cold marble, and a gag silenced him. As the hooded figure turned away from having secured him, Harry recognized Wormtail.

His mind clouded with terror. Wormtail! If Wormtail was here, was Voldemort nearby? Had he, Harry, been captured by Voldemort after all his careful planning to hide his identity? Panting with fear, Harry forced himself to focus and tried to see what was happening. As Wormtail came in and out of Harry's limited field of vision, he tried to see what the older man was doing. The traitor appeared to be preparing a cauldron, filling it with water and lighting a fire under it. The bundle of rags squirmed on the ground.

Voldemort's cold voice demanded, "Hurry!" Harry's heart pounded. Voldemort was here! But where? Where was the voice coming from?

Wormtail opened the rags and uncovered a scaly-looking snakelike creature that was worse than any nightmare monster Harry's imagination had ever conjured. Small and vaguely humanoid, its red eyes glowed in the darkness. Wormtail lifted the creature and placed it into the bubbling cauldron.

Harry's head was throbbing and it was difficult to think. Cedric's dead body lay in the distance and, in the cauldron bubbling away merrily, Voldemort was in the process of being reborn. It was as if he were in

a nightmare but there was no way to wake up.

As if in a fog, Harry heard Wormtail perform the magical incantation. "Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!" Dust from the grave at Harry's feet rose in a little swirl, like a miniature tornado, and floated through the air until it settled into the cauldron.

"Flesh of the servant, willingly given, you will revive your master." And, with a flash of a silver dagger, and a scream of anguish, Wormtail cut off his own right hand, which fell with a sick plop into the cauldron. Harry closed his eyes tightly and lay his head back against the headstone. He moaned into his gag from the horror of what was happening in front of him.

Feeling someone near him, Harry opened his eyes. Wormtail was right in front of him, panting with pain. Voice shaking, Voldemort's servant completed the incantation. "Blood of the enemy, forcibly taken, you will resurrect your foe." And, taking the dagger he held in his left hand, he cut through Harry's sleeve and deep into his right arm. Harry's cry of shock and pain was muffled by his gag. Wormtail bottled some of the blood flowing from the boy's wound and shuffled over to pour it into the cauldron. With this last ingredient, the liquid turned white.

At first sparks issued from the cauldron, and then all was silent. Suddenly, thick steam erupted from the cauldron, swelling over its edges and spilling onto the grounds nearby. As the steam dissipated, a shadowy figure took shape. Tall and thin, the creature rose to its full height and stepped proudly from the cauldron. Lord Voldemort had risen again.

Chapter Nineteen – Year Four; The Dark Lord Rises

“Robe me,” Lord Voldemort commanded his moaning servant. Wormtail hastened to obey, picking up the robes and draping them over the newly risen dark wizard.

Lord Voldemort ran his hands lovingly down his new body, reveling in his corporeal form. When his hand touched his wand, he stopped and slowly placed his hand inside the robe pocket and gently withdrew the wand. He gazed at it reverently. Then, he raised his eyes to Harry and smirked in triumph.

“I have arisen, Mark Twist. Delayed, it is true, by your actions in preventing me from possessing the Sorcerer’s Stone. But, I am back now. Back, and ready to reclaim my natural right as the master of this world.”

With a flick of his wand, he summoned Wormtail to him. The crying, moaning man floated a few feet above the air until he dangled limply in front of the other wizard. Voldemort pulled up the sleeve of Wormtail’s robe and looked at the Dark Mark burning on the man’s arm. “It is back,” he said softly, “they will all have noticed it...and now, we shall see...now we shall know...” He pressed a finger to the mark and Wormtail cried out in pain. Behind his gag, Harry cried out too as his scar gave another throb of pain.

Soon, the graveyard was full of apparating wizards who had responded to Voldemort’s summons. The masked figures appeared unable to believe their eyes as they saw the Dark Lord, returned after an absence of thirteen years. One by one, the Death Eaters fell to their knees and kissed the hem of Voldemort’s robes, obsequiously calling him “Master.”

As Voldemort greeted his followers, chastising them for not having done more to look for him during his years in exile, Harry leaned his head back against the headstone and tried to calm his thoughts. Here was the day he had been expecting since Aunt Petunia had told him four years ago that he had been born to defeat a psychopathic wizard terrorizing the wizarding world. His mother had boasted that he was a

hero. Today was obviously the day when he would have to defeat Voldemort. Right?

But, Harry didn't believe himself. Who was he kidding? There was no way he could defeat Voldemort. There was Cedric's lifeless body, bearing mute testament to the ruthless efficiency with which Voldemort dealt with anyone who stood in his way. Just a few steps away, Voldemort was effortlessly conjuring a silver hand to replace Wormtail's missing limb. Surrounded by his Death Eaters, Voldemort looked like the Prince of Darkness. How was he, a fourteen year old boy, going to defeat him?

In a dull fog, Harry watched as Voldemort continued to berate his followers, performing the cruciatus curse on a few in punishment for their failure to be more loyal during his time of need. Harry recognized Lucius Malfoy among the Death Eaters.

Voldemort reached a gap in the circle of his Death Eaters. Harry's eyes widened when Voldemort said, of one of his missing followers, "He is at Hogwarts, that faithful servant, and it was through his efforts that our young friend arrived tonight..."

Harry felt as if the puzzle pieces had finally fallen into place. Here was the danger he had feared from the moment his name had been pulled from the Goblet of Fire. A Death Eater had obviously put his name into the Goblet and set in motion the events that had led Harry to this graveyard now, tied to a headstone, waiting for Voldemort to kill him. Was it Snape? Karkaroff? Barty Crouch Sr.? Someone else?

The Death Eaters all stared at Harry and Voldemort continued. "Yes, Mark Twist has kindly joined us for my rebirthing party. One might go so far as to call him my guest of honor." As if sensing the tension in the air, the snake slithered fretfully around the base of the headstone where Harry was tied. Voldemort strode over to stand next to Harry so that, when he spoke, the eyes of the Death Eaters were on both of them.

"You all know that, on the night I lost my powers and my body, I tried to kill Harry Potter. His mother died in the attempt to save him – and unwittingly provided him with a protection I admit I had not

foreseen... I could not touch the boy. His mother left upon him the traces of her sacrifice...this is old magic, I should have remembered it. I was foolish to overlook it. I miscalculated, my friends, I admit it. My curse was deflected by the woman's foolish sacrifice, and it rebounded upon me."

Harry held completely still, only his eyes moved as they followed Voldemort's every move. As frightened as he was, Harry could not help but be transfixed by Voldemort's story. He was learning, for the first time, that his mother had sacrificed herself for him. Hearing this confirmation of her love for him brought a strange mix of pleasure and pain.

Voldemort continued. "Aaah...pain beyond pain my friends; nothing could have prepared me for it. I was ripped from my body, I was less than spirit, less than the meanest ghost...but still, I was alive. What I was, even I do not know. I, who have gone further than anybody along the path that leads to immortality. You know my goal...to conquer death. And now, I was tested, and it appeared that one or more of my experiments had worked...for I had not been killed, though the curse should have done it."

Harry listened, mesmerized, as Voldemort described his exile in the forests of Albania, waiting for his followers to come to his rescue. Then, Voldemort described his elation at finding a wizard who he could possess and use to try to steal the Sorcerer's Stone. "I was thwarted," Voldemort hissed. "Thwarted by this mudblood, Mark Twist!"

Voldemort stopped in his story and stared menacingly at Harry. For a minute, Harry thought that the other wizard would kill him right then. Harry felt bile rise up behind his tongue and burn his throat. But, Voldemort continued pacing and picked up his story once again.

"Somehow, through accidental magic I suspect, this boy was able to generate a protective shield around himself. My host's body burned when it touched him and I had to flee that body to save myself. I was left incorporeal again, as weak as ever I had been."

Voldemort explained how Wormtail had returned to his service, finally presenting the Dark Lord with the chance he needed to regain his body. When a witch from the Ministry of Magic, Bertha Jorkins, had wandered across their path, Voldemort had learned that the Triwizard Tournament was to be held at Hogwarts this year. Voldemort had also broken through the Memory Charms that had been placed on Bertha to learn that she knew of a Death Eater, loyal to Voldemort, who would be eager to help the Dark Lord. Voldemort had killed Bertha once she was no longer useful to him.

Coming to more current events, Voldemort explained, "To restore my body and my strength, I knew an old piece of Dark Magic, the potion that revived me tonight. Wormtail provided one of the ingredients: flesh given by a servant. My father's bone, naturally, meant that we would have to come here, where he was buried. The last ingredient needed was the blood of a foe.

"I wanted Harry Potter's blood but the boy is missing. Perhaps dead, since all of the efforts of the Ministry and that old fool Dumbledore have not been able to locate him. Now that I am back, I will look for him as well. If he is not already dead, he soon will be. But, in his absence, whose blood should I use?

"Wormtail would have had me use any wizard who hated me, as so many of them still do. But, if I could not have Harry Potter, I wanted Mark Twist. This boy, the same age as Harry Potter, who so ill-advisedly interfered with my plans. This mudblood who set himself against me and delayed my return to corporeal form."

Standing in front of Harry, Voldemort stared at the boy. Lowering his voice, so that the Death Eaters had to strain to hear him, Voldemort continued his explanation. "I could not discover where he lived; I had to capture him while he was at Hogwarts. How to do this? Why...by using Bertha Jorkins' information, of course. Use my one faithful Death Eater, stationed at Hogwarts, to ensure that the boy's name was entered into the Goblet of Fire. Use my Death Eater to ensure that the boy won the Tournament – that he touched the Triwizard Cup first – the Cup which my Death Eater had turned into a Portkey, which

would bring him here, beyond the reach of Dumbledore's help and protection, and into my waiting arms."

Raising his arm lazily, Voldemort pointed his wand at Harry and said, "Crucio!"

Harry jerked madly behind his bonds. The pain was unbearable. It felt as if every bone in his body was on fire. He prayed for it to end. Voldemort raised his wand, lifting the curse and, as suddenly as the pain had started, it ended.

Behind his gag, Harry panted and he hung limply, held up by the ropes that bound him to the headstone. Death Eaters were laughing and calling out, "Mudblood," and "Kill him, Master."

Voldemort smiled evilly. "Oh, I intend to kill him. But, I'll give him a sporting chance, of course." The Death Eaters laughed, although they didn't understand what Voldemort meant. "Untie him, Wormtail, and give him back his wand."

Through the fog of pain, Harry struggled to understand what was happening. He had expected Voldemort to cast the killing curse at him at any second. Instead, Wormtail was untying him and forcing his wand back into his hand. Reflexively, he tightened his grip on the wand, and tried to control his staggering when the ropes supporting him were removed.

"You have been taught how to duel, Mark Twist? We bow to each other," taunted Voldemort.

Harry said nothing. Voldemort might kill him, but he wasn't going to play the older wizard's sick games beforehand. Harry forced himself to stand as tall as possible and cast a defiant glance at Voldemort.

"I said bow." Voldemort raised his wand and forced Harry to bow. "Very good," approved Voldemort. "And now, we duel."

Harry desperately tried to think of a spell. He had spent years studying to prepare for this moment. Yet, it was as if his brain had

decided to betray him. He couldn't seem to recall any spell except "Expelliarmus," the spell Professor Snape had used against Professor Lockhart years ago in the one and only wizard duel Harry had ever witnessed.

Before Harry could even raise his wand, Voldemort had hit him with another Cruciatus curse. The young boy writhed on the ground in excruciating pain. When it stopped, Harry's throat felt raw from his screams. He staggered to his feet and stumbled into the circle of the watching Death Eaters. He was roughly pushed back into the middle of the circle, to face Voldemort again.

Voldemort was clearly enjoying the game. "That hurt, didn't it, Mark? You don't want me to do that again, do you? Answer me! Imperio!"

Harry shrugged off the curse, and answered back, "No!" Throwing off the curse gave Harry a boost of confidence. Facing Voldemort, he called out, "You're a sick bast-ard! Some big man you are! Fighting a fourteen year old with a score of Death Eaters standing by to help you if you can't manage it on your own. You're pathetic!"

Eyes widening in fury, Voldemort thrust his wand in front of him and howled, "Avada Kedavra!"

Simultaneously, Harry yelled, "Expelliarmus!"

The red light from Harry's wand collided in mid-air with the green light issuing from Voldemort's wand. The light beams connected and turned a bright, deep gold. The strange connection lifted the two astonished wizards into the air and placed them a short distance away, where the Death Eaters surrounded them once again.

The beams splintered and formed a web of light around Harry and Voldemort, placing them in a protective bubble that the Death Eaters could not penetrate. "Do nothing!" shouted Voldemort. Harry could see that the older wizard was astonished and frightened by what was happening.

Suddenly, beautiful, haunting music seemed to emanate from the light beams. Harry recognized the mystical sound – it was phoenix

song. The music filled him with hope and gave him the strength to maintain the connection between the wands.

It seemed as if the wands were engaged in a battle of light. At first, a large bead of light seemed to be forcing itself closer to Harry's wand tip. However, Harry focused every bit of strength he had and slowly forced the bead back toward Voldemort's wand. Harry wasn't even sure why it was so important that he win this battle.

After what seemed a lifetime, but may have only been minutes, the bead touched Voldemort's wand tip. Immediately, the echoes of previous spells erupted from the wand: screams, the shadow of the silver hand crafted for Wormtail, more shouts and, finally, a vaporlike image of Cedric Diggory.

Harry almost dropped his wand in shock. Voldemort's eyes widened in fright and his mouth was slightly open in a silent yell. "Hold on, Mark," encouraged Cedric.

Nodding his understanding, Harry tightened his grip on the wand. Soon, more screams and then the vaporlike image of the old man Harry had seen Voldemort kill in his vision during the summer. This was followed shortly by another ghostlike figure; this time, a middle-age witch, who Harry suspected was Bertha Jorkins. They both spoke encouragingly to Harry, urging him not to let go.

And, then, another shadowy figure emerged from Voldemort's wand. Harry's mother. It took all of Harry's strength not to drop his wand and go running to her for protection, for comfort, for love. His eyes looked at her hungrily. She was so pretty, with her long red hair and bright green eyes. She was so young!

"It will be all right...hold on..." she encouraged. "You're doing a great job."

Another body joined the growing crowd of shadow figures. A tall, handsome man stood protectively next to Lilly. He had glasses and dark, untidy hair that Harry remembered he had used to have himself, before he had changed his appearance. His father. James Potter.

Harry felt a funny flip in his heart. His parents were standing feet away from him and they didn't know who he was! He wanted desperately to talk with them, call them mother and father, hear them call him Harry. Instead, he was in a battle of life and death with a raving lunatic and wondering whether he had lost his mind to be seeing these shadows.

James came close and whispered in Harry's ear. "When the connection is broken, we will linger for only moments... but, we will give you time. You must get to the Portkey, it will return you to Hogwarts. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Harry gasped.

"Mark," whispered Cedric. "Take my body back, will you? Take my body back to my parents?"

"I will," Harry vowed.

"Do it now. Be ready to run," urged James Potter.

"Now!" shouted Harry and he broke the connection between his wand and Voldemort's. The protective bubble of light disappeared. The ghostlike figures remained, circling Voldemort and hissing at him.

Harry ran as fast as he could, trying to ignore the pain in his leg.

"Stun him!" Voldemort yelled.

Harry dove behind a headstone in order to avoid the spells being cast at him by the pursuing Death Eaters. Seeing Cedric a few feet away, Harry left the protection of the headstone and dove for the body. He lay flat on the ground, holding on to Cedric's arm.

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!" shouted Voldemort. He smirked as he saw that Harry had no protection. He raised his wand.

Pointing his own wand at the Triwizard Cup, Harry yelled, "Accio!" The Cup flew toward him and Harry caught it by the handle.

As the Portkey whisked him away, bearing his tragic burden, Harry heard Voldemort's scream of fury.

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Harry was, once again, thrown into a maelstrom of wind and color. When the spinning stopped abruptly, he slammed into the ground. He released the Portkey, which rolled a short distance away, and grabbed hold of the grass beneath him instead. His other hand clutched Cedric's arm. He kept his eyes tightly closed.

He heard yells and screams from the crowd and then hands grabbed him and turned him over, and Harry's hand fell away from Cedric's body. Reluctantly, he opened his eyes to see the headmaster gazing down at him in concern. "Mark," the older wizard called, urgently. "Mark, are you all right?"

Harry looked into Professor Dumbledore's eyes and said weakly, "He's back. Voldemort's back." Saying the words caused his stomach to burn, as if he had swallowed poison. This was his fault. He was supposed to defeat Voldemort. He had failed and, instead, Cedric was dead and Voldemort was returned to power.

"What?!" asked Dumbledore in shock.

Harry repeated. "Voldemort. He is reborn."

Dumbledore stared at the boy blankly. Before he could gather his thoughts, the Minister of Magic appeared. Cornelius Fudge had been among the audience, visiting the headmaster and watching the last task in the Tournament. "Dumbledore! Diggory – he's dead!" All around him, Harry heard people start to realize this. The words were repeated from one wizard to another. Some said it in low tones, still in shock. Others yelled it. "He's dead! Cedric Diggory! Dead!" Girls were starting to sob hysterically.

Dumbledore rose heavily to his feet. "Take Mark to the hospital wing, Alastor. Minister, you and I must talk to Diggory's parents."

Harry turned to Professor Moody, who helped the boy gain his feet. Harry was grateful for Moody's support, as he didn't think he could stand without it. Harry tried to avoid looking at the students watching him from the stands. As Moody helped the boy make his way slowly from the stadium, Harry heard a low muttering start to gain strength. "He killed Diggory! Just like Rita Skeeter warned! Mudblood! Murderer!"

Harry stopped and started to turn back to face the crowd. "No!" he gasped. He couldn't believe that they would think that of him!

Moody forced the boy to continue walking. "Never mind, Twist. They're just in shock. Don't worry about them. You need medical attention before anything else. Tell me what happened."

As they made their way to the castle, Harry explained. He found it hard to keep his thoughts from becoming disjointed. "The Cup acted as a Portkey and took Cedric and me to Voldemort. He killed Cedric and then used my blood to be reborn."

It sounded unbelievable when said bluntly. But, thankfully Moody seemed to accept what he said at face value. They had reached Moody's office and Harry sank into a chair. The boy did not wonder why they hadn't gone to the hospital wing. Moody muttered an incantation and the pain in Harry's leg went away. Drawing a pain-free breath, Harry murmured a grateful, "Thanks!" When pressed, he drank a glass of foul-tasting potion. It helped clear away some of the fog in his head.

"The Dark Lord is back? You're sure he's back?" Moody asked eagerly.

"Yes, sir. Voldemort performed a spell that restored his body." Harry felt like crying; he held himself stiffly in his chair, struggling to maintain control over his emotions.

"And the Death Eaters? They returned?" asked Moody.

"Yes, loads of them," confirmed Harry.

“How did he treat them? Did he forgive them?”

This question suddenly reminded Harry of what Voldemort had said. He jumped up from the chair and said urgently, “There’s a Death Eater here at Hogwarts! He put my name into the Goblet of Fire!”

“Yes, I know,” said Moody. And, without warning, he pulled out his wand and pointed it at Harry.

“What are you doing?” asked Harry, in puzzlement. He was too surprised to be alarmed.

“I put your name in the Cup. The Dark Lord wanted to kill you. I believe that he will be happy if I do it for him. But, I don’t want to take away that pleasure from him, if he wants to do it himself. Instead, I have another idea that he may find more...interesting.” Moody’s mouth twisted in an unfamiliar smirk. “Many of the students seem to think that you killed Diggory. Enjoy Azkaban, Twist. Stupefy!”

There was a flash of red light and Harry was hit in the chest by the stunning spell. He fell to the floor, unconscious. Smiling in anticipation, Moody quickly pulled Harry’s wand from the boy’s hand. Using his own wand, Moody unlocked a large trunk in the corner. It opened to reveal a deep pit, where an emaciated, unkempt man was lying. The real Mad-Eye Moody.

Harry, laying unconscious, didn’t see the effects of the Polyjuice Potion wear off the man he had known all year as Moody, exposing the imposter, Barty Crouch, Jr. With a wave of his wand, Crouch summoned the sleeping Moody from the depths of the trunk. He lowered the wizard onto the floor, where the sick man stirred weakly. Crouch studied Moody dispassionately. With a flick of his wand, Crouch returned the magical eye and wooden leg to their true owner. Then, muttering various spells, within a few minutes, he transformed the Moody lying on the floor to look exactly like the Moody who had left the stadium with Mark Twist a short while ago.

Lifting the wand that he had taken from the unconscious boy, Crouch laughed softly as he pointed the wand at the still-sleeping Moody. "Avada Kedavra!" he said, gleefully. A flash of green light sped through the air and hit the ex-Auror squarely. Silence reigned for a brief moment as Moody's restless movements ceased abruptly.

Crouch carefully placed Harry's wand back in the boy's hand. Then, taking a last look around to make sure that he had set the stage appropriately, Crouch tapped himself on the head with his own wand. Satisfied that he was invisible, he opened the door and checked that the corridor was clear. He quickly strode out of the room, through the castle, and onto the Hogwarts grounds.

As Barry Crouch Jr. was making his way to the edge of the Hogwarts grounds so that he could apparate away, and rejoin Voldemort, Harry was slowly waking. He gave his head a little shake and stood up shakily. All at once memory returned. He tightened his grip on his wand and held it out in front of him in a defensive stance. He looked around wildly for Professor Moody. He didn't understand what was going on. Why had Moody attacked him?

Harry's eyes fell on the dead body lying on the floor. He felt as if he had been punched in the stomach. Slowly, he approached the body. Was this a trick? Was Moody pretending to be dead? If not, who had killed him?

Just then, the door of the office burst open. Instinctively, Harry raised his wand and prepared to battle whoever was there.

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Dumbledore. Harry's wand flew out of his hand and the headmaster caught it. Professors Snape and McGonagall were on either side of the headmaster. The Minister followed on their heels.

Everyone looked around, taking in the scene at a glance. Professor Moody lay dead on the floor and Mark Twist was standing over the body. Shocked eyes stared at the boy.

Realizing what they were thinking, Harry shook his head vehemently. "No!" he said. "I didn't kill him! He tried to kill me! I don't know why!"

He said he had put my name in the Cup and that he would kill me for Voldemort.” Harry hesitated. Then, remembering, said, “No. That’s not right. He said that he’d do something else that Voldemort would like more. He said I’d be blamed for Cedric’s death and I’d go to Azkaban.” There was a beat of silence. “I didn’t kill Cedric!” Harry’s voice rose shrilly. He could hear himself start to sound hysterical.

Dumbledore obviously thought so because, although his eyes were hard and cold, he spoke quietly, trying to calm the boy. “So, you killed Professor Moody because you thought he was trying to kill you?”

“No!” yelled Harry. “I didn’t kill him. He stunned me and, when I woke up, he was dead. I don’t know how or who killed him. I didn’t kill him! I swear! This must be some plot of Voldemort’s.”

The Minister flinched at the sound of Voldemort’s name and spoke up. “There is no plot by You Know Who. You killed Diggory and then Moody. It’s obvious: you wanted to win the Triwizard Cup and you killed Diggory when he got there before you. Then, Moody must have found out the truth somehow. Maybe he finally figured out how you were able to trick the Triwizard Cup into naming you champion. You killed him to protect your secret.”

“That’s not true! I saw Voldemort reborn, I tell you. Voldemort killed Cedric! I wouldn’t have hurt Cedric, I swear. I wouldn’t hurt anyone! Please. You’ve got to believe me.” Harry looked from one adult to the next, desperately seeking some friendly face.

Fudge clearly didn’t believe a word Harry said. It was difficult to tell with Professor Snape, who regarded Harry with narrowed, considering eyes. Professor McGonagall looked like she was about to be ill. Finally, Harry looked at Dumbledore and begged him with his eyes. Silently, Harry thought, “I’ll forgive you. I’ll forgive you for leaving me with the Dursleys if you just believe me now and help me. Please help me!”

Dumbledore stared at Harry without saying a word for a long moment. Then, he touched his wand tip to Harry’s wand. “Prio*ri* Incantato!”

As Voldemort's wand had done such a short time before, Harry's wand started to regurgitate a shadow of the spells it had performed, in reverse chronological order. A flash a green light filled the room. McGonagall gasped aloud. Harry's mouth dropped open. Dumbledore's jaw clenched and he seemed to turn paler. Harry's wand belched out a few flashes of light indicative of stunning spells and the impedimenta jinx. Finally, after the group saw a flash of light signaling the use of the expelliarmus spell, Dumbledore lifted his wand and Harry's wand fell silent.

Harry raised stunned eyes to the headmaster. Dumbledore looked back at him coldly. "It would appear, Mark, that you did indeed kill Professor Moody. Did you kill Cedric, too?"

"No," moaned Harry. He was no longer shouting. His denial was low and distraught.

Fudge snorted. "It's clear. He took Diggory's wand. You saw the expelliarmus spell. He probably used Diggory's own wand to kill him. Twist thought he'd get away with killing Diggory because everyone would think he had been killed by one of the dangers in the maze. Everyone knows the Tournament is dangerous. But, by killing Moody, he gave himself away for both murders."

"Voldemort did this! I...I just don't know how." Harry tried to defend himself but he didn't know how to convince his accusers.

Professor Snape finally spoke. "It is true, headmaster, that the Dark Mark that was branded on me when I was a Death Eater has been growing clearer all year. When the Dark Lord touched the Mark of any Death Eater, we were to Disapparate, and Apparate, instantly, at his side. A short while ago, it burnt black. Why do you think Karkaroff fled tonight? We both felt the Mark burn. The Dark Lord may indeed have returned."

The Minister backed away from Snape. "You're mad. Insane. You Know Who has not returned."

Dumbledore spoke slowly. "It may be that Mark overheard you speaking with Karkaroff about the Dark Mark getting stronger, Severus, and decided to use Voldemort as a convenient cover for his actions. We have long worried that Voldemort is gaining power." He ignored Fudge's involuntarily jerk at hearing the name again. "I believe it to be only a matter of time before he does so. I do not see, however, how Voldemort could have put Mark's name into the Triwizard Cup. I certainly don't believe that Moody did so. Nor, do I believe, Mark, that Moody would have tried to kill you. Certainly, not unless he believed you to be a danger."

Dumbledore held up Harry's wand for emphasis. "And this wand bears testimony that you performed the Avada Kedavra curse. I have been worried about you for some time, Mark. Worried that you were a follower of the Dark Arts. You have hidden your motives well. There were times when I thought...hoped...I had misjudged you. Hoped that you were a true Gryffindor."

Harry opened his mouth but no words came out. His heart was beating so fast, he thought it would leap out of his chest. He had watched Voldemort kill Cedric, had been subjected to the Cruciatus curse, been forced to duel with Voldemort, had seen his parents for the first time in his memory, been attacked by his Professor and was now being accused of being a murderer. A roaring sound filled his ears and he felt the corners of his mind start to turn to black.

He muttered, with surprise in his voice, "I think I'm going to faint." And he did.

Professor McGonagall took a step toward the boy, who was lying in a heap on the floor. "That won't be necessary, Minerva," said Dumbledore in a harsh voice. "I can move him." With a flick of his wand, he lifted the boy into the air.

"What will you do with him?" she asked fearfully.

Fudge said forcefully. "He'll be tried for the murders of Cedric Diggory and Alastor Moody, of course. There's no way that boy doesn't end up in Azkaban. For now, he should be sent to the Ministry to be held over for trial."

Professors McGonagall and Snape looked at Dumbledore to see his response. Slowly, the headmaster nodded his head.

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It was a solemn group that proceeded to the headmaster's office. Once there, Professor McGonagall used the Floo Network to accompany the dead body of Alastor Moody to St. Mungo's. Professor Dumbledore muttered something to Professor Snape that Fudge couldn't overhear, although the Minister strained his ears trying to eavesdrop. Snape nodded his head in agreement and left the office.

"Where's he going?" asked Fudge.

"I've asked him to do a task for me," said Dumbledore.

"Yes, but what?" asked Fudge suspiciously.

"I'm afraid that's between him and me."

Fudge looked angry at the headmaster's refusal to be forthcoming. "You've asked him to check out whether Voldemort has returned, haven't you?" he guessed.

"The Mark has grown darker recently," said Dumbledore, in tacit admission of Fudge's guess.

"He's a Death Eater, Albus! How can you trust him?"

"I believe him to be a changed man, Cornelius."

"Well, You Know Who is not back. You, yourself, said that Twist just used that story to save himself."

“Just because the boy may have lied about Voldemort’s killing Diggory and Moody doesn’t mean that Voldemort hasn’t returned in truth.”

“That has not happened!” said Fudge. Then, staring at the unconscious boy hovering in mid-air in Dumbledore’s office, he said pensively, “It’s astonishing that a boy so young could be so evil.”

Suddenly, Dumbledore looked tired and old. “He is not the first to be so depraved so young. I had hoped that, by keeping an eye on him, I could prevent him from hurting anyone if it turned out that he was wicked. I will always regret that Cedric and Alastor died because I did not keep close enough watch.”

“You can’t blame yourself,” said Fudge kindly. “I don’t think anyone would have suspected such depravity. Anyway, where he’s going, he won’t be able to hurt anyone else.”

He took a handful of Floo powder and cast it into the fireplace. A blaze of green fire flared up and Fudge waved the unconscious Mark Twist into the fireplace to transport him to the Ministry of Magic. The young boy did not wake up during his trip. Hours later, when Harry did finally regain consciousness, he was already in a holding cell at the Ministry.

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Chapter Twenty – Year Four; At the Ministry

Muggleborn on Rampage

Terror at the Triwizard Tournament

By Rita Skeeter

Tragedy struck at Hogwarts last night when a muggleborn student at the school killed another student and teacher in cold blood. Readers may recall that, last Halloween, muggleborn Mark Twist had deceived the Goblet of Fire so that he was named as one of the champions representing Hogwarts at the Triwizard Tournament being hosted this year at the school. Last night was the final task and, fearing that Cedric Diggory, a wizard with far superior skills would win the Cup, Twist shocked the school by killing the handsome pureblood.

Minister Fudge confirmed that, in an act of the utmost cowardice, Twist apparently stole Diggory's wand and heartlessly used that wand to kill its owner. Then, having discovered a taste for blood, Twist killed Alastor Moody, an ex-Auror who had taken a temporary teaching position at the school. Headmaster Dumbledore himself confirmed that Twist's wand cast the killing curse. It is suspected that Moody discovered that the muggleborn had killed Diggory. To prevent his teacher from revealing this secret, Twist murdered Moody. Twist was caught in the act of killing Moody and was taken into custody.

"It was a terrible tragedy," said Fudge late last night. "It's hard to believe that such a young boy could be so evil. Even Dumbledore was surprised and he admitted that he's been watching Twist for a while, worried that the boy was a follower of the dark arts."

"He's stark, raving mad," said one of the guards at the Ministry. "He's been calling out to anyone who'll listen that You Know Who has returned and that he's the one who killed Diggory and Moody. It'll give you chills to hear that boy call You Know Who by his name."

Perhaps Twist plans on entering an insanity plea when he is tried before the Wizengamot this week on two counts of murder. We have

seen how devious he is already. He may be hoping to avoid Azkaban in favor of a soft cell in St. Mungo's. We can only hope that the Wizengamot sees through the sick lies of a depraved mind.

This reporter predicted the danger Twist posed to the champions. We must ask why the Ministry and Hogwarts did not do more to protect our children, the most precious resource we have?

A concerned parent, Narcissa Malfoy, whose son Draco is in Twist's year at Hogwarts, had this to say. "I shudder when I think that my son was so close to this psychopathic killer every day. I know that people don't want to admit it, but blood will tell. It's no coincidence that this heinous act was committed by a muggleborn. Those born of wizard blood have too much nobility to behave so heartlessly."

With the recent news that muggles were responsible for abusing Harry Potter, it is no wonder that many question whether the wizarding world should reconsider our relationship with muggles. While not everyone will agree with Mrs. Malfoy's views (at least not publicly), more parents are expected to put pressure on Professor Dumbledore to halt the practice of permitting muggleborns to attend Hogwarts.

Meanwhile, Mark Twist is under heavy guard at the Ministry. "He's clearly a Dark Wizard in training, if you ask me," said another official, speaking on condition of anonymity. "Everyone knows the rumor that You Know Who killed his first person at the age of sixteen. Twist is only fourteen. If he's not stopped now, he'll be worse than He Who Must Not Be Named."

In the name of Harry Potter, Cedric Diggory and Alastor Moody, we call upon the Ministry to stop Mark Twist. Stop him now.

Dumbledore finished reading the article and laid it back down on his desk. He was sitting alone in his office, the morning after the murders of Cedric and Moody.

His shoulders sagged and his head bowed. He felt every day of his 113 years. This was a catastrophe! At this moment, a young boy who was completely innocent was sitting in a cell at the Ministry awaiting

trial for murder and the wizarding world was unaware that Voldemort had arisen. Worse, they had heard the news from the boy and were happy to disregard it, in part because he, Dumbledore, had denounced the boy.

Snape had returned to Voldemort after the Minister had left with Twist. He had used his well-honed cunning to convince Voldemort that he was still loyal. Snape had learned that Barty Crouch Jr. was still alive and, unbelievably, had been impersonating Alastor Moody for the entire school year. Crouch had killed the real Moody, framing Twist. Crouch had been the one who had placed Twist's name in the Triwizard Cup so as to bring the boy to Voldemort. Shock followed shock. Peter Pettigrew was alive as well, having framed Sirius Black, just as Twist had said. Peter, on Voldemort's orders, had killed Diggory.

Worse yet, knowing all this, Dumbledore was not free to tell anyone of Twist's innocence. To do so would be to reveal that Snape was a spy. It was more important to maintain Snape's cover, particularly now that Voldemort had risen again, than to save Twist. It was a terrible shame but Dumbledore could not let the welfare of one boy trump the need to do what was best in the long run for the many.

As it was, Dumbledore knew he would have a hard time convincing Fudge and the rest of the wizarding world that Voldemort had indeed returned. He would need to find a way to force Voldemort to reveal himself. He would need to do this without compromising Snape's cover.

Dumbledore had already contacted former members of the Order of the Phoenix for an emergency meeting. They would meet in an hour at the Hogs Head and plan their strategy. One of the first orders of business would be to recruit more members. With Voldemort returned, it was crucial that those who opposed his rule move quickly.

Fudge, unfortunately, had made it very clear that he would not believe any story that confirmed Voldemort's return. The Minister was living in denial, and, with every hour that passed, became increasingly hostile to any suggestion that Mark Twist was telling the truth.

The Daily Prophet was stirring up hatred against Twist and, indeed, all muggleborns. Dumbledore feared that attacks against muggles would increase once more, as they had done in the weeks following the news that Harry Potter's muggle relatives had abused the boy.

Where was Harry Potter? It was more imperative than ever that he be found. If the prophecy was true, only the boy could defeat Voldemort. Dumbledore didn't want to consider the possibility that Harry Potter was dead and that nothing stood in the way of Voldemort's eventual domination of the wizarding world

The Daily Prophet may have only cared about selling newspapers, but the ramifications of its sensationalism were all too real. Even without the paper turning popular opinion against him, Mark Twist would have had an almost impossible task of convincing the Wizengamot that he had not murdered Diggory and Moody. With the Prophet's hate-mongering, Twist stood no chance at all.

The headmaster had worried that Twist was, perhaps, a rising dark wizard but all of the boy's actions had been nothing short of heroic. He had stopped Voldemort from gaining the Sorcerer's Stone. He had saved Ginny Weasley from the basilisk, destroying Tom Riddle's diary in the process. He had helped Sirius Black to escape which, in light of the new information Dumbledore had of Black's innocence, also counted in the boy's favor. He had acquitted himself well in the Tournament, which the boy had not, after all, entered voluntarily. He had shown real kindness in freeing Dobby and demonstrated true nobility in trying to save all of the hostages in the second task.

Voldemort had focused on the boy, clearly seeing him as a threat. Was such a boy, who had done no harm, to be sent to Azkaban? Dumbledore felt sick to his stomach. He hadn't felt so helpless since he had heard that, despite all his efforts to protect them, Lily and James Potter had been killed.

There was a knock on the door. Dumbledore looked up with dull eyes and called, "Come in."

Severus Snape entered. He looked pale and exhausted. Dumbledore knew that Snape had been interrogated extensively by Voldemort the night before. Dumbledore did not need to ask to know that the interrogation had not been pleasant. The elderly wizard thought, not for the first time, that it was ironic that a former Death Eater was one of the bravest men he knew. "Headmaster. It is time to leave for the Hogs Head, if we are to be on time."

Dumbledore rose from his chair. "Yes, Severus. We must go. We cannot afford to let time slip away from us."

Snape's eyes fell on the paper lying on Dumbledore's desk. Understanding that Dumbledore had read the lead article, he asked, "What do you intend to do about Twist?"

Dumbledore sighed heavily. "There is nothing to do. The only way to free him would be to prove that Crouch and Pettigrew, both known to be long dead, killed Diggory and Moody instead. No one would believe us, even if we tried to tell the truth. And Voldemort would know that the only way for us to know this information is if you had told us. We cannot compromise your position. You are too important to the cause."

"So Twist is to be sacrificed?" Snape's tone was neutral and it was difficult to read his expression.

Dumbledore nodded slowly. "I see no other options. In battle, there are always casualties of war. Unfortunately for Mr. Twist, he is what the muggles call 'collateral damage'."

"It is hard for a commander to send soldiers into certain death, even when he knows that it must be done."

"Yes," said Dumbledore. "But, why does the 'right' decision seem so wrong?"

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When Harry had first awoken in the Ministry holding cell, he had felt an eerie calm descend upon him. It was as if his mind, overloaded with shock, had decided not to allow anything to upset it anymore. So, after failing to convince his guards that he was innocent and that Voldemort had returned, Harry stopped wasting his breath.

He ate the breakfast they brought him, although he felt strangely guilty for eating. It seemed disloyal to Cedric's memory that he would be eating porridge less than a day after Cedric's death. But, Harry had not eaten much the previous day and he was ravenously hungry.

After breakfast, Harry waited for someone official to visit him. Surely, Fudge or Dumbledore would want to speak with him. Voldemort had done a fabulous job of framing him. But, now in the light of day, thinking more clearly than he had the night before, Harry realized that he had a trump card that Voldemort didn't know about. It was time to reveal that he was Harry Potter. Once he did so, there was no way he'd be sent to Azkaban. Everyone would believe that Voldemort had returned.

Thank goodness he wasn't really an unknown muggleborn. Voldemort wasn't the only one preaching intolerance and prejudice. Too many in the wizarding world were quick to believe the worst about Mark Twist because he was a muggleborn. Once Harry had resumed his real identity, he planned on reminding everyone that his own mother had been muggleborn.

The morning passed uneventfully. No one came to visit him and the guards who brought him his lunch just left the food on a tray on the floor of the cell and wouldn't answer any of his questions or speak to him. When Harry finished his food, they removed the tray – again, without speaking to him.

Harry was lying on the bed, the sole furniture in the cell, when he heard the key turn in the lock of his cell and the door opened. Harry quickly swung his legs over the side of the bed and sat up. Dumbledore swept into the room. Harry bounced to his feet, a relieved smile on his face. "Sir! I'm so glad you've come! I wanted to swear to you, again, that I didn't..."

Dumbledore held up his hand to halt Harry's defense and the boy stopped in mid-sentence. The headmaster did not return Harry's smile and the elderly wizard's face was uncharacteristically grave. "I know, Mark."

"What? What do you know?" asked Harry, confused.

"I know you did not kill Cedric Diggory or Alastor Moody."

Harry let out a deep breath and laughed a little. "Whoa! That's great! What a relief! I was pretty worried, let me tell you!" Harry felt a lightening of the knot in his stomach that he hadn't even realized was there. He smiled widely and sat down on his bed. After a second, he rose again and said, "Do you know who killed Professor Moody?"

"I cannot tell you that, Mark," said Dumbledore gravely.

"Oh," said Harry, taken aback. "Something to do with Voldemort, huh?"

Dumbledore was struck by how easily this boy said Voldemort's name. What a brave child. This boy, currently being pilloried in the press, had fought Voldemort on three occasions and lived to tell the tale. Full-grown wizards wouldn't be able to do as much. And now, because of Voldemort, this valiant boy was going to Azkaban. Dumbledore looked away. He couldn't bear to see the boy, looking so relieved, not knowing what was in store for him.

"What convinced you I was innocent?" asked Harry, curiously.

"I can't tell you that either, Mark."

"I...I don't understand. Won't everyone need to know – if not, how will people believe in my innocence?"

Dumbledore said nothing, staring at the floor for a minute. Then, taking a deep breath, raised his eyes to Harry and said, "You have been exceedingly brave. You deserve nothing less than the truth. Where I cannot tell you the truth, I will not lie. I have information that

confirms your innocence, Mark. But, it is not information that I am at liberty to disclose. This is one of the most difficult moments of my life. I stand here before you to tell you that I know you are innocent and yet I cannot help you.”

Harry was stunned. His blood ran cold. Once again, Dumbledore was betraying him. In barely a whisper, he demanded, “What? You ... you dare to tell me that you will let me be tried for the murders of Cedric and Professor Moody, knowing I am innocent?”

Dumbledore looked him squarely in the eyes. A tear welled in the piercing blue orb and ran down the lined cheek of the aged wizard. “Yes,” he confirmed baldly.

Harry took a step backward. Seeing the look of horror and betrayal on the boy’s face, Dumbledore explained. “Mark, you know Voldemort has arisen. Once more, the wizarding world faces a threat that can destroy our very existence. I cannot overstate the evil of which Voldemort is capable. I must do everything in my power to help defeat him. The information I have would not be believed unless I told my source. To do so would undermine our work to defeat Voldemort.”

There was silence and then Harry, standing tall and looking at Dumbledore with cold eyes, contempt in his voice, accused, “You will let them send me to Azkaban?”

Dumbledore did not respond.

“I am fourteen.”

Still no response.

“I will go crazy there. You know how the dementors affect everyone. And I’m...particularly susceptible. I will go mad.”

Still silence.

“Tell me, Professor. Why is Voldemort the evil one if you are willing to let them do this to me?”

Dumbledore looked as if he had been slapped. “Mark,” he began. His voice broke. “You can have no idea how much I regret that I cannot help you.”

Harry felt a burning anger fill every corner of his being. He had no interest in listening to Dumbledore’s excuses. All he could think was that it was happening again. Dumbledore had abandoned him to abusive relatives in order to seal the “blood protection.” Every thrashing, harsh word, and hungry night he had suffered, and every hug or kiss he hadn’t received, was the result of Dumbledore’s plans to defeat Voldemort. He, Harry, was caught in the crossfire.

In fury, Harry decided that he would not reveal that he was Harry Potter to Dumbledore. The old man didn’t deserve to be the first to know. He would wait until the trial and reveal himself before the Wizengamot. Then, let Dumbledore beg his forgiveness!

Harry stared angrily at Dumbledore. “I find it hard to believe, Professor, if you were the one being threatened with Azkaban, that you would go quietly. I think that you’d find a way to save yourself.”

“Mark. I have a duty to protect the wizarding world. I may be the only one who fully understands the immensity of the task before us to defeat Voldemort. I cannot endanger this mission by setting myself as an outlaw by helping you escape. If there were any way to help you escape without casting suspicion on anyone else, including me, I would do so. I will do everything in my power to free you as soon as possible. It is only a matter of time before Voldemort makes his presence known and then we will clear your name.”

“You know, Professor. When my name came out of the Goblet, I wondered whether you might have been the one to put it there. I researched you to see if I could learn why you might have done that. ‘Know thine enemy.’”

“I’m not your enemy, Mark!”

“You’re not my friend!” Harry rebutted. “I learned about your epic battle with Grindewald. I thought that there was no way that such a foe of the Dark Arts would have put my name in the Goblet. I thought that you were a ...hero. But, you’re not so different from Grindewald after all. He was all about the ‘Greater Good’. Isn’t that what you’re saying to me now? That you’ll stand aside and let them put an innocent fourteen year old in Azkaban, knowing I’ll go crazy, because it’s for the Greater Good?”

Dumbledore turned ashen. He swayed and looked as if he might faint. Harry could have no idea of the power of his accusations. He did not know that, in his youth, Dumbledore had befriended Grindewald. It had been Dumbledore’s own philosophical musings about the Greater Good justifying wizarding dominion over muggles that Grindewald had adopted to support his master race ideology.

Before Dumbledore could respond, the door of the cell clanged open again. “Professor Dumbledore,” called a guard. “The Minister has requested a meeting with you.”

Dumbledore hesitated and then nodded in agreement. “I’ll be back, Mark,” he said as he moved toward the door.

“I don’t think we have anything more to say to one another,” retorted the boy.

Dumbledore hesitated at the door and looked back. “Have you contacted your parents?”

Harry was silent for a moment, thinking. Then, he said, “Not yet. I was hoping to be released and not have to tell them anything. But now...I think I will tell them that I have been accepted to a study abroad program. I wouldn’t want them to worry when there’s nothing they can do to help me. Apparently, there is nothing anyone can....or is willing...to do.”

Dumbledore looked at Harry, regret etched into his face. “Please forgive me,” he whispered.

Harry raised his chin and stood tall. "I don't think I can."

Dumbledore was struck by how regal the boy looked standing there, pronouncing judgment. The young boy's tone was unforgiving. Dumbledore walked from the room, his steps slow and his shoulders stooped.

"I don't know if I can ever forgive myself either," Dumbledore thought as he walked to the Minister's office.

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Harry seethed. One of the guards, with a smirk on his face, had left a copy of the Daily Prophet on Harry's dinner tray. After reading the article, Harry had thrown the tray at the wall of his cell in fury. He remembered the catcalls of the students accusing him of being a murderer as he left the stadium, still shaking from his encounter with Voldemort. He dwelled on Dumbledore's abandonment of him for expediency's sake. And, now, this vile article!

"Am I willing to be a hero for this?" he asked himself. "They don't deserve for me to save them!"

"Of course," a small voice whispered in Harry's head, "you might not be able to save them even if you wanted to. You don't really think you can defeat Voldemort, do you?"

A surge of anger coursed through Harry and brought a boost of confidence with it. "I escaped him, didn't I? There I was, surrounded by Death Eaters and Voldemort cast the Avada Kedavra directly at me, and I still escaped. Doesn't that show that he can't kill me? That, eventually, I'll be able to bring him down? Maybe not now, when I'm fourteen. But, I'll continue to learn and, maybe years from now, I'll be powerful enough to defeat him."

"Not if you're in Azkaban," whispered that sly little voice.

“I’m not going to Azkaban,” he assured himself. “Wait until we’re before the whole Wizengamot. I’ll turn back into Harry Potter and let them crawl over themselves to apologize.”

Harry enjoyed this daydream for a while. He particularly enjoyed imagining the scene where Dumbledore begged his forgiveness. “Forget it, old man!,” he thought to himself in savage satisfaction.

However, the teenager couldn’t maintain that level of fury indefinitely and, as the hours passed, Harry’s anger calmed somewhat. This boredom was awful. He had absolutely nothing to do but lie down on his bed and stare at the walls and ceiling. “Dementors would be better than this!” he snorted, in gallows humor.

But, as the night fell, Harry’s boredom was relieved in an unexpected manner, making him recall longingly the tedious, uneventful hours he had scorned. Lying in his bed, counting the cracks in the ceiling, Harry felt a sudden sharp twinge in his scar. “Ow!” he shouted out loud, unprepared for the pain.

The room around him started to dissolve and he found himself in a hazy tunnel, where the walls shimmered insubstantially. He felt as if his brain was being sucked through that tunnel until it stopped suddenly in a large room, lit only by the fire burning in the fireplace along one wall.

He cast his gaze across the room and saw scores of hooded figures on their knees bowing before him. “Rise,” Harry said in a cold, high-pitched voice.

The Death Eaters rose to their feet. “Those fools!” Harry laughed delightedly. “They lock up the boy and allow me to wander free! Barty, come closer.” He beckoned to one of the Death Eaters, his unnaturally long fingers gesturing lazily.

One of the hooded figures approached Harry and fell down on his knees, kissing the hem of his robe. “Master!” the kneeling figure moaned in ecstasy at being allowed so near his idol.

Pleased, Harry waited a beat and then, "Stand up, Barty. You, my most loyal of servants, shall be rewarded for your efforts on my behalf. If only all of my Death Eaters were as loyal as you..." and here Harry paused to cast a glare at the other figures ranged around the room. They recognized the danger and hunched in upon themselves. "...if they were as loyal as you, I would have returned to my body long ago and we would already be in control of the Ministry. No matter. No matter. That is the past. Nothing can stop us now." And, he laughed his shrill laugh again.

He turned to a man standing quietly at his side. "Severus, you are sure that no one suspects that anyone other than Twist killed Diggory and Moody?"

Snape spoke calmly. "The boy goes to trial in two days. Azkaban has already been notified that he will be arriving there that night. Fudge is taking no chances. There are Dementors already at the Ministry ready to escort this...rising Dark Lord." Snape said this last sarcastically.

Harry laughed again, appreciating the humor. "I could kill the boy," he mused slowly. "But, I agree with Barty. This is far better. Let the boy rot in Azkaban, put there by the Ministry itself." His sharp laughter rang in Harry's ears as the teenager found himself back in his cell, clutching the sides of his cot and staring up at the ceiling once more.

Harry breathed heavily and raised his head from the pillow to look around the room, searching the corners as if expecting a Death Eater to jump out at him. When he assured himself that he was still alone, he lay his head back heavily. Wow! He had been back in Voldemort's head. There was no doubt that he had seen through Voldemort's eyes. Harry shivered.

"Don't lie!" he commanded himself, sternly. "I didn't just see through Voldemort's eyes, I was Voldemort! I felt what he was feeling and thought what he was thinking. Somehow, we are connected. I've suspected it before, but now that Voldemort has regained a body, our connection is stronger. I can see what he's doing more clearly than ever and I am in his thoughts."

It was terrifying. Harry tried to control the rising fear from clouding his brain. "I can take advantage of this," he told himself. "Let's just hope that this connection doesn't run both ways. I don't want Voldemort peering into my head!"

Harry sat up shakily. Well, at least he now knew who had killed Moody. He had recognized Barty Crouch, Jr. Obviously, Crouch was no more dead than Pettigrew. And, taking a leaf from Pettigrew's book, had framed another for the murder he had committed.

Harry wondered whether Crouch Sr. was also involved. If so, the Ministry had been infiltrated by Death Eaters already. He'd have to warn someone. "But who?" he thought bitterly. "No one believes a word I say."

"After you reveal you are Harry Potter, you'll tell them," he reassured himself. "Then, everyone will believe you. Everyone would believe anything that Harry Potter says."

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Two days later, Harry awoke from a light sleep to hear the door of his cell creak open. Harry's eyes flew wide and the last remnants of sleep vanished immediately. This was not the guards. They threw open the door with a bang, little caring if they were disturbing the boy within. Whoever was opening the door now was trying to be quiet. Harry automatically reached for the wand he stored beneath his pillow each night. He remembered, with a lurch of his stomach, that he no longer had a wand. It had been confiscated from him the night of the murders.

He stood up quickly and moved to stand against the wall, hidden by the opening of the door. He tried to quiet his breath and waited with his heart pounding.

When he saw the mop of red hair peering over the edge of the door, he let out his breath with a whoosh. That mop, otherwise known as Fred Weasley, turned to look behind him and whispered, "No one's here! We must have the wrong cell!"

“It can’t be wrong. I took it off of the guard’s roster!” responded George.

“I’m right here,” said Harry, stepping forward.

Ron, who had entered the room behind his brothers, jumped and whirled around. “Don’t do that, Mark! You frightened a year off my life!”

Harry just smiled. He had never been so happy to see anyone in his life. George quickly shut the door behind Ginny, who was also sidling into the room. Harry stared at her in surprise. She blushed but steadily kept her eyes on him.

“We’re here to save you, Mark!” said Ron grandly.

Harry felt a leap of hope. “Dumbledore sent you?”

Fred shook his head. “No. The adults think their hands are tied. They are distraught, mind you, but not doing anything.”

George explained. “Our parents have been recruited into the Order of the Phoenix. It’s a secret society that Dumbledore formed the first time You Know Who rose to power. Dumbledore has reformed the Order now that You Know Who has returned. He approached Mom and Dad and they went to a number of meetings in the last few days.”

Fred continued, “We just returned from Hogwarts this morning. We decided to try out some new inventions we’d been working on.” He dug into his pocket and pulled out some flesh-colored string. “These allow us to listen in on ‘private’ conversations.”

“Little did we know just what we’d hear!”

Ron interjected. “We knew that you were innocent, of course. You wouldn’t believe the fights that went on at Hogwarts. Half the students are saying you’re a murderer and the other half are defending you. You know what side we’re on, mate.”

Harry nodded. He couldn't speak over the lump in his throat.

Ron continued, "Hermione has been researching wizarding law. We tried to get in to speak with Dumbledore, but he hasn't been available. Hermione's going to contact a legal aid society. She thinks that they have to appoint you counsel to represent you during the trial. But, we," he waved his finger in a circle, indicating his siblings and himself, "decided that we're not going to take the chance of your going to trial."

Ginny nodded grimly. "We can't trust the Ministry to give you a fair trial. Mom and Dad admitted as much, when they didn't realize that we were listening."

"What did they say?" asked Harry.

"Well, apparently Moody wasn't Moody at all!" said Ron, his own eyes wide in astonishment, as he told the tale he still couldn't believe himself. "He was really an imposter all along. You remember Crouch, the Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation? Percy works for him. Anyway, he's been missing and Dumbledore thinks he must have been killed. Because, you won't believe this, his son – Barty Crouch, Jr. – was a Death Eater and was supposed to have died years ago in Azkaban. Well, he didn't die! Instead, he's been impersonating Moody all year, using Polyjuice Potion. He framed you!"

All eyes were on Harry, waiting for him to show his shock. He already knew this information, but didn't want to explain to the Weasleys how he had come by his knowledge. So, he pretended to be shocked by the revelation. He let his mouth drop open and said, weakly, "Really! That's unbelievable. Why would he do this?"

Harry thought that his acting was atrocious but it satisfied his friends. George eagerly explained, "You Know Who was really mad that you stopped him from getting the Sorcerer's Stone. He wanted Crouch to enter you into the Triwizard Tournament and, when you touched the Triwizard Cup, it became a Portkey that took you to You Know Who, who used your blood in a spell to regain his body."

“It sounds too far-fetched,” said Harry musingly. Listening to Ron and George summarize what had happened made Harry realize just how unbelievable the story sounded. Without proof, there was no way he’d be able to convince the Wizengamot that this is what truly happened. But, thank Merlin, they’d believe Harry Potter, right?

“The reason we know all this is...hold your hat...Snape is a spy for the Order,” Ron revealed with relish.

This time, Harry didn’t have to pretend astonishment. “No way!”

The Weasleys all nodded in confirmation. “Yup!” continued Ron. “Hard to believe that greasy git is an ally.”

“Assuming he’s not playing both sides,” Fred muttered ominously.

“He’s the one who told Dumbledore that Crouch was the imposter,” said Ginny.

Harry now understood who Dumbledore was protecting by refusing to tell the Wizengamot that “Mark Twist” was innocent. It was his spy, Snape. Ginny confirmed this when she said, “We overheard our parents speaking about how you’d been framed but that Dumbledore and the Order didn’t know how to free you without revealing that Snape was a spy. Mom was crying that they couldn’t stand back and let you go to Azkaban.”

“But Dad said that there was nothing they could do,” added Ron, bitterly.

“He was broken up about it,” said Ginny in defense. “I’ve never seen him look so unhappy.”

Harry said nothing. He knew he was being unfair – after all, what could Mr. Weasley do? But, he still resented that none of the adults he knew were prepared to intervene to save him. They should figure out what to do. They were the adults!

Fred deflected Harry's resentment by finishing, "Anyway, the adults may sit around moaning about what to do, but we've come to save you."

Harry laughed in disbelief. "What are you going to do?"

"Don't laugh," cautioned Fred haughtily. "You are speaking to the Weasley twins."

Ron and Ginny coughed into their hands. Fred amended, politely, "...and siblings. There is little that we won't dare and, I modestly add, succeed in doing."

Harry felt a rush of affection for the whole group. They didn't know that he was Harry Potter and they were prepared to risk themselves to save him. He didn't need their help, of course. Once he revealed he was Harry Potter, as he now fully intended to do during the trial, he would be fine. But, knowing that they were prepared to put themselves in danger for him...he would never forget this. Never.

Curiously, Harry asked, "How are you going to save me?"

George eagerly explained. "We have a plan! Ginny and Ron will distract the guards. They did it brilliantly on the way here already." Ginny and Ron both blushed with pleasure upon hearing the rare praise from their older brother. "You will eat this cream puff." George held up a pastry treat.

Harry looked at it in astonishment. He recognized the Canary Cream pastry that the Weasley twins had invented at the beginning of the school year. The Weasleys all smiled upon seeing Harry's expression. "I'm not joking," said George. "You will turn into a canary. Fred and I have been working on the spell. We've added a special ingredient just for this one and we think the transformation will hold for about twenty minutes. That will give us time to sneak you out of here."

"It won't work," said Harry, definitively. "The Ministry has to have enchantments in place to prevent this sort of thing."

Fred disagreed. "Maybe a standard transfiguration spell, but we think that the Ministry security is lax when it comes to potions. Anyway, we're game to try it and what do you have to lose?"

Harry shook his head. "I might be facing Azkaban but there's no way I'm going to let you four risk your lives, too. If we get caught, you'd all be sentenced to Azkaban with me!"

"At least we'd be in adjoining cells," Ron joked. Harry didn't smile.

Ginny stepped forward and took one of Harry's hands in hers. "Mark. You saved my life. I'm not standing aside and letting them send you to Azkaban for a crime you didn't commit. I'm willing to take this chance and so are my brothers." Ron, Fred and George nodded behind her. "We understand the danger. We're not stupid. But, we think our plan has a chance of working. Are you willing to give it a try?"

Harry felt tears pool in his eyes. He swallowed hard. "I...I don't think I can ever thank you all enough for what you are willing to do for me. No one's ever ..." Harry didn't complete the sentence. Going into history was dangerous. "But, I can't permit you to risk your lives for me." He held up his hand to forestall the arguments he could already see them marshalling to use against him. "Anyway, I have a plan to avoid Azkaban already."

"Really? What?" they all asked in unison.

The teenager hesitated. Should he tell them who he was? He wasn't worried that the Weasleys would give him away on purpose. But, in their excitement at learning who he was, would they tell their parents? Tell Dumbledore? Inadvertently say something to the wrong person? His safest course was to wait until he was standing in front of the whole Wizengamot before revealing who he was.

Slowly, Harry said, "I can't tell you. I'm sorry, but I think I need to be quiet about this. Everyone will find out what I'm talking about at the trial. I'm sure the plan will work, though, so I'm really not in danger."

The Weasleys looked at him doubtfully. It was clear that they wanted to argue with him, but, as Harry wouldn't share the details of his plan, they couldn't disagree with it. Before they could say any more, they heard a loud clanking from the corridor outside.

They all froze. "What's that?" asked Fred in alarm.

There was another loud sound outside, and Harry, reacting quickly, grabbed Fred's wand from his hand and pushed the four Weasleys against the side wall. Pointing his wand at the wall, Harry shouted "Gemino!" A duplicate wall appeared, a few feet in front of the other, sealing the Weasleys into the small space between the walls.

Harry quickly threw Fred's wand under the bed, where it was hidden by the blanket that he had dropped on the floor earlier. Just in time. The door swung open and four guards poured in, wands raised.

One of guards pushed Harry up against the wall and quickly patted him down, searching for any weapon. No one seemed to notice that the room was a bit smaller than it had been before.

Harry heard the click click of high-heeled shoes. He was roughly turned around and he found himself facing a witch he had never seen before. She was wearing a pleasant smile, which didn't reach her eyes. On her black robes was a pink broach and she had a frilly pink bow on top of her head. Despite these small signs of feminine softness, Harry noted the hardness in her eyes that called to mind his Aunt Petunia. She looked like a toad eying a juicy fly. He suspected, in alarm, that he was the fly she was intent on swallowing.

"Hem, hem," the woman coughed delicately. "Mark Twist. I am Dolores Umbridge, Senior Undersecretary to the Minister of Magic. I have been placed in charge of the security around you. And lucky I have been. It appears that it has been most lax. Why on the way here, do you know what we found?" She smiled sweetly at Harry. "A number of the guards supposed to be guarding the corridor to this cell have mysteriously disappeared or appear confunded. You don't know why that is, do you?" she asked pleasantly.

“No, ma’am,” said Harry politely. “I’ve been locked in this cell for days. I don’t know what’s going on outside.”

“Hmm,” she said consideringly. She cast her eyes around the room and Harry held his breath. Harry prayed that the Weasleys would have enough sense to stay quiet behind the wall. Umbridge walked around the room slowly, searching its corners, her heels clicking away. Finally, she arrived back at Harry’s side.

“So,” she smiled, “you didn’t just try to break out of here?”

Harry shook his head vehemently. “No! I wouldn’t be able to, so why try?”

Umbridge pushed her face closer to Harry’s and said quietly, “I don’t believe you.” She pulled back and gestured to two of the guards. “Go get them.”

They scurried from the room and Harry wondered where they had gone. There were still two guards remaining, one on either side of him.

“You are a dangerous criminal, Mr. Twist. It is my responsibility to make sure that you are not permitted to escape. The Minister has faith in me and it is not misplaced. I will do what needs to be done.”

Harry felt the room become colder. A fog of despair started to descend upon him. No one loved him. He would rot away in Azkaban and no one would care.

Harry shook his head. Where had these thoughts come from? Then, Harry understood as the door opened again and, standing beside the two guards who had returned, were two Dementors. They floated into the room.

The guards next to Harry recoiled a bit, but Umbridge cast a Patronus. The little kitten gamboled around the room, warming the air. Harry was protected from the effects of the Dementors but he continued to eye them with concern.

Umbridge gestured to the Dementors with her wand. "They are here to escort you to Azkaban, Twist. You won't be given another opportunity to escape."

"What?! I haven't had a trial yet. I haven't been sentenced to Azkaban!"

"That's a formality only, Twist. Everyone knows you are guilty. I am not going to allow you to escape."

"I didn't try to escape!"

Umbridge laughed a tinkling, little laugh. "No. Those guards just were confunded on their own."

Harry felt his fear soar. "You can't do this. It's illegal! I have a right to a trial!"

Umbridge's smile faded and an ugly look came over her face. "You talk about rights. You mudblood. You killed a pureblood wizard and a former Ministry employee. You are lucky I don't tell the Dementors to administer a kiss right here."

Harry shrank back against the wall. The way Umbridge looked, and the excited expression in her eyes as she mentioned the Dementor's kiss, made Harry scared that she might change her mind and order the kiss after all. His blood froze.

"Please. I'm innocent and I can prove it." Harry heard the fear in his voice and he could tell that it pleased Umbridge.

She had a satisfied smirk on her face. "Liar!"

She raised her wand at Harry. "No!" he yelled.

"Stupefy," she shouted. A red beam flew from her wand and hit the teenager in the chest. He crumpled without another word.

“Take him,” she ordered. The Dementors swooped down and carried the teenager from the room. Umbridge and the guards followed and closed the cell door behind them.

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After silence had reigned a few minutes, a muffled, “Finite incantatem,” issued from behind the wall. The false wall shimmered and disappeared, revealing the four Weasleys, all pale and shaken.

George raised his wand and said, “Accio wand.” Fred’s wand flew into his hand from beneath the bed. Without a word, George handed the wand to Fred.

“What are we going to do?” asked Ginny in a broken whisper.

“We’re going to tell Dad,” said Fred. “He’ll have to help us figure out what to do.”

Without another word, they carefully left the room, taking care not to be seen as they left the Ministry and headed back to the Burrow.

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Chapter Twenty-One – Year Four; Azkaban

When the four youngest Weasleys arrived back at the Burrow, they found their parents waiting anxiously at the kitchen table for their return.

“Where were you?” asked Molly shrilly, as she jumped up from the table when she saw them, hurrying over to give each a hug.

Arthur remained seated, taking a shaky breath. Quietly he said, “It’s not safe to be wandering around right now.”

Fred shrugged out of his mother’s embrace and walked over to his father. Towering over the seated man, he demanded, “Because of You Know Who?”

The parents exchanged worried looks. Finally, Arthur nodded. “Yes.”

“We know all about it,” said Ron, coming to stand next to his older brother. “We don’t have time to go into how come we know right now. We went to the Ministry to save Mark.” He ignored his parents’ gasps. “We screwed things up, Dad. They think he tried to escape because of us and now they’re taking him to Azkaban right this minute! We’ve got to stop them!”

Arthur leapt up from the table. “What?! Right now, without a trial?”

Ginny, who had been crying silently, gave an audible sob. “What are we going to do? We got to save him, Dad. We’ve got to!”

Arthur ran his hand up his face and buried it in his hair for a moment. Then, coming to a decision, he released his hair, and said definitively, “We’ve got to speak with Dumbledore.” He didn’t answer any of the questions or comments that his children threw at him as he went to the living room. Taking some floo powder from the jar next to the fireplace, he threw it inside and said, “Dumbledore’s office.” He then kneeled beside the fireplace and stuck his head into the dancing flames.

Apparently, Arthur found Dumbledore in his office because he soon was engaging in a one-sided conversation. "Professor Dumbledore! There's been an emergency. We need to speak urgently."

Silence while Arthur listened to whatever Dumbledore was saying in response.

"I believe you'll want to speak with my children. They are the ones with something to tell you. I suggest we speak at Order headquarters."

Silence again.

"Yes, of course." Arthur pulled his head out of the fire and said, "Stand back. Dumbledore is coming here for a moment to tell you all where the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is located. I prefer that we speak there, so that there is no chance of being overheard. The location is under a Fidelius Charm and Dumbledore is the Secret Keeper, so he has to be the one to tell you where it is."

No sooner had Arthur finished his explanation than there was a whoosh in the fireplace and Professor Dumbledore stepped out. He looked as if he hadn't slept in days and his face had new age lines.

Wasting no time, he cast a bubble around the Weasley children that would prevent anyone listening to what he was about to say. He then told them all, "The location of the headquarters of the Order of the Phoenix is Number 12 Grimmauld Place, the family home of Sirius Black."

"Black!" exclaimed Fred. His siblings were speechless with shock. "Why is the Order located at his home? He's a Death Eater!"

Dumbledore responded, "I presume that the information you wish to share with me is urgent so I suggest we leave the explanations about Black to another time. Suffice it to say that we have learned that Sirius Black was framed and did not betray the Potters to Voldemort."

The children flinched at hearing Voldemort's name. Ron said, "So, Mark was right about that too? Sirius Black was innocent."

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. We have been able to contact Black to tell him that we in the Order believe in his innocence. Unfortunately, we cannot prove it to the Ministry and the rest of the wizarding world yet. In the meantime, Black has offered us his family home for the Order's headquarters. He intends to join us again in our fight against Voldemort."

Dumbledore turned away from the children and lifted a mug from a side table. He gave a wave of his wand and the mug glowed for a brief moment. "This is now a Portkey that will take you all outside Number 12 Grimmauld Place. When you arrive, think of the location in your mind and it will appear to you. Go inside and we'll discuss what you wish to tell me. I will meet you there. Now, on the count of three." The teenagers and their parents each put a finger on the mug. "One. Two. Three."

The Weasleys disappeared from view and Dumbledore disappeared from the Burrow to join them.

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"It's all our fault!" moaned Ginny. She started sobbing again, and her mother hugged her. But, over her head, Molly looked anxiously at Dumbledore.

The children had finished telling their parents and the headmaster what had occurred at the Ministry. The adults all looked very pale and grave.

Ron said regretfully. "We shouldn't have gone! He said that he had a plan. He wasn't worried about going to Azkaban. But, we screwed it up! They're taking him there now! What do we do?"

Dumbledore said heavily. "I'm not sure that there's anything we can do."

“What?!” said the four teenagers together.

Molly held up her hand to silence her children. “Can’t you go to the Minister, Professor? Tell him that Umbridge is taking Mark to Azkaban without a trial?”

“For what purpose, Molly? Do you think that the Minister would intervene? Umbridge is correct in thinking that her boss would approve of her actions. For one thing, he’ll avoid a trial where Mark is sure to mention again that Voldemort has arisen.”

He held up his own hand to silence the protests around him. “And a trial won’t help Mark. It will just delay this moment.”

There was silence as the children gazed at the adults in betrayal. “So, you’re just not going to do anything?” asked George.

Arthur hesitantly asked, “Isn’t there any way for us to intercept Mark on his way to Azkaban? Maybe release him and hide him away somewhere?”

Dumbledore hesitated, thinking. “It actually might be possible because of Umbridge’s intervention,” he said thoughtfully. “This may be a lucky break. By sending Mark to Azkaban without a trial, he won’t have the tracking device that they put on prisoners during transport. That device would have been attached immediately following a conviction. It’s still dangerous to try to free him of course and, if anyone is found to have helped Mark, it would mean a lifetime sentence to Azkaban.”

“I can’t stand back and watch an innocent boy go to Azkaban.” Arthur looked at Ron. “Mark’s the same age as Ron. He’s muggleborn and doesn’t have anyone to help him.”

Molly looked like she might faint. But, she nodded in agreement. “I would hope that people wouldn’t stand aside and let something like this happen to my son. I can do no less for Mark.”

Dumbledore nodded and looked oddly relieved. "This isn't the safest course for the Order but I have to admit that it's been hard to do nothing about Mark."

Ron gave a whoop of joy and Dumbledore cautioned. "This may not work. Don't celebrate too quickly."

Ron looked abashed. Dumbledore continued. "The more people who are involved, the more likely we are to be discovered. For this reason, I suggest just Arthur and one other person."

"Why not you?" Ron demanded.

Dumbledore didn't take offense at Ron's tone. "Because, if we are successful in rescuing Mark, the Ministry will suspect me – even though I was one of his accusers. Fudge will think I was trying to protect a student from Azkaban. I will need to have an alibi, so I will be with the Minister at the time that Mark is discovered missing."

"What about my father? Won't he be suspected?" asked Ginny fearfully.

"I will be able to give him an alibi," explained Dumbledore. "I will say he was waiting for me in my office and it's impossible to leave my office without my knowledge."

"Kingsley Shacklebolt," Arthur piped up. He had been thinking about who would be best to accompany him on his rescue mission. He ignored the clamoring of Fred and George who were begging to go with him.

Dumbledore nodded in agreement. "Perfect choice. The two of you will need to go to Dumas Pier. That is where the boat taking Mark to Azkaban will depart. You must take great care to hide your identities. Use disillusionment charms and I'll lend you an invisibility cloak.

"You'll be able to stun any guards, but the Dementors are only repelled by a Patronus. Be careful to stun the guards first so that they won't see the shape of your Patronuses. Otherwise, your identities

might be compromised. The Dementors can't see the Patronuses, only feel them. When you get Mark, take him back here. Once we have him here, we'll decide where to send him."

Knowing that time was running out, they contacted Kingsley, who joined them at the headquarters a few minutes later. They quickly explained the situation and Kingsley immediately agreed to take part in the rescue mission. Wasting no more time, the men left the headquarters, apparating slightly outside the town where Dumas Pier was located.

They were both under disillusionment spells and couldn't see each other. Neither spoke, but they heard each other's footsteps as they hurried to the Pier. The air was cold around them, perhaps feeling the despair of the prisoners incarcerated in Azkaban prison. Both men tried to avoid looking out over the turbulent water at the prison. It loomed ominously in the distance, as if alive, like a monster waiting to eat its prey.

As they approached the Pier, the men gripped their wands tightly. But, the Pier was strangely silent. Where was everyone? And then, their hearts sank. The reason for the silence was explained. The guards had already departed. Across the water, landing at the Pier on the other side, at the entrance to the prison, was the boat. They watched hopelessly as the tiny figure of Mark Twist disappeared inside.

Without saying a word, Kingsley returned to the Ministry. He went to his office and waited for Dumbledore to come by. He pushed paper around on his desk, pretending to be working, but finding it impossible to concentrate. About a half an hour later, Dumbledore, leaving the Minister's office, passed by Kingsley's desk. He didn't speak with Kingsley but flicked a hopeful look at the other man as he passed. Kingsley gave a short shake of his head. Dumbledore looked stricken but he did not stop or say a word. He left the Ministry and returned to Hogwarts.

Arthur apparated back to Grimmauld Place, where the rest of the Weasley family was waiting. Everyone stood up anxiously as he entered the room. The answer was on his face but Arthur said anyway, his voice breaking, "We were too late."

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Harry woke to a cell that resembled the holding cell at the Ministry. This cell was also bare, with only a cot and chamber pot. Harry took the thin blankets off the bed and wrapped them around his shoulders to ward off the chill that permeated the walls. The big difference between this cell and the Ministry cell is that this one seemed to be steeped in despair. The walls seemed grayer and the air thicker with hopelessness.

There was very little light in the cell. The sole illumination was coming from a small skylight, high in the ceiling. Out of habit, Harry tried opening the door to his cell. It was firmly closed, of course. When his eyes adjusted to the lack of light, Harry stared out the small dirty window inset in the door. The bars covering the window made it difficult to see but there was little worth viewing anyway. All he saw was a stone wall opposite his cell.

Harry felt his body start to shake. He pulled the blankets around himself more firmly but he had never felt so cold in his life. He wondered whether it was fear or if the Dementors were already affecting him. There were no Dementors around at the moment and he was grateful for this small favor. But, they were surely going to come and then what would he do?

“Go crazy,” the voice in his head tormented.

“No! Sirius Black was able to stay sane and he was here for twelve years! I can do the same.”

“You’re not an animagus,” reminded the voice.

“I’ve got to prove my innocence! I’ve got to tell someone I’m Harry Potter.”

At that moment, Harry heard a swooshing sound coming down the corridor. The air turned even colder. Harry wondered whether he would freeze to death. A Dementor peered in through the bars at

Harry. Harry gasped and stepped back. He tripped over the blanket he had wrapped around himself and fell hard on his backside.

“I’m Harry Potter!” he yelled, scrambling away. “I’m Harry Potter! Please tell the Minister! There’s been a mistake! I’m innocent! I’m Harry Potter! You’ve got to let me out!”

The creature drew a deep rattling breath and Harry felt his eyes roll back in his head.

“Kill the spare!” said a high-pitched voice. Harry heard a thud and found himself staring into the lifeless eyes of Cedric Diggory.

“No!” he screamed as he was dragged back to be tied to a headstone.

As the boy lay on the cold stone floor of the prison cell, he relived the night of Voldemort’s rebirth. Only after he reached the part where he had fainted in Moody’s office, did he regain consciousness.

Harry lay still on the floor. He felt feverish and exhausted. It took all of his strength to pull himself off the floor to lay on his bed instead. The Dementor had gone, but it had done its damage. Harry couldn’t think. He just lay on the bed, shivering, and cold inside.

The hours passed and Harry’s shivering subsided. Some food had been pushed through the door and he forced himself to take a few bites. When he felt his strength return, he stood up and walked around the cell, trying to loosen the stiffness in his bones.

On one of his circles around the cell, he looked up at the door window as he passed and noticed a dark shape. He stopped, his heart sinking to his toes. A deep rattle sounded again. Harry immediately fell to the floor, consciousness slipping away.

“You are a waste of space!” said Uncle Vernon nastily. “It would have been better if you’d never been born.”

“You are responsible for your mother’s death,” accused Aunt Petunia.

“You’re a freak!” taunted Dudley. “No one loves you. No one will ever love you. You will never have friends. You will always be alone.”

This time, when Harry awoke, he didn’t try to pull himself to his bed. He lay on the ground and stared at the ceiling. His body was so stiff, he didn’t think he could move anyway.

Weakly, he thought, “I’m not going to last even a day. If they don’t drive me insane, I will surely become ill from the cold and die.” A sense of peace flowed over him at the prospect. “I would like to die,” he thought, in slight surprise. “That wouldn’t be so bad.”

He heard another rattle sound and once again was plunged into dark memories. “Stand aside you silly girl,” ordered a high-pitched voice.

“Not Harry! Take me instead!”

“Avada Kedavra!”

Harry watched as his mother tried to protect him from Voldemort’s curse, only to be killed herself.

When Harry awoke this time, he felt a burst of renewed energy. His mother had died trying to protect him! Voldemort had told the Death Eaters this when explaining how baby Harry had survived the Killing Curse but, seeing it for himself through his own memory, made it real for him. The knowledge of that love burned in his heart. The Dementors may have forced him to relive that memory to feed off of the sorrow and despair Harry felt, but they had also released a feeling of strength and warmth inside him.

His mother had loved him! Basking in that knowledge, Harry was able to pull himself off the floor and into the bed again.

What should he do? The Dementors would come again. He may have just wished for death but, seeing how his mother had sacrificed herself

to save him, made him burn with a fierce determination. "I won't let your sacrifice be in vain," he promised his absent mother. "I have got to kill Voldemort! I have got to get out of here and kill him!"

Voldemort had condemned him to a life without anyone to love him. The hatred welled up inside Harry.

Thinking of Voldemort appeared to have conjured him up. Harry felt the shimmering tunnel inside his head and, recalling how this led him to Voldemort's mind, at first tried to resist entering the cavity. But, at the sound of a rattling breath at the door again, Harry instinctively jumped inside. As before, Harry felt sucked through the tunnel in his mind.

"They sent the boy to Azkaban without a trial?" Harry asked Snape, who was kneeling before him. He laughed delightedly.

He turned his wand over his hand. His white, long fingers caressed the wood. "With that filthy little mudblood out of the way, I want to move forward with finding Harry Potter. Severus, you are sure that Dumbledore doesn't have any clue where the boy might be? Are you sure he hasn't been pretending?"

"Master. I have seen the old fool look for Potter for the past four years. He is frantic to find the boy. He does not know where the boy is, I am sure."

"Um... I will wish to speak with Potter's muggle relatives. They may have information that would lead me to the boy's whereabouts."

Snape continued hesitantly. "My Lord. I believe that the Ministry has hidden these muggles somewhere. When it was learned that they had abused the boy, many wizards were looking for revenge. To protect them, the Ministry hid them away."

Harry laughed. "It's too bad they are muggles. Otherwise, I would reward them for having abused Potter. I will speak with Nott when he returns. I want him to search at the Ministry for any clue as to where the Ministry may have hidden them."

After a slight pause, he continued, "Severus, you need to return to Hogwarts. You may go."

"Yes, My Lord." Snape kissed the hand Harry held out to him and then left the room.

Harry beckoned to another Death Eater who had stayed quietly in the corner. Harry circled his head on his shoulders, relieving some stiffness there. "Barty. It has been a long time since either of us has been able to give free reign to our desires. Tonight, I am pleased. I want to celebrate. Join me as we have some fun."

Barty kneeled. "You honor me, My Lord."

Harry smiled coldly in anticipation. Temporarily lifting the wards protecting the place, he disappeared, with Barty holding on to his robes. They arrived at the outskirts of a muggle town. At Harry's gesture, Barty scrambled to his feet.

"Come!" commanded Harry. Barty followed willingly.

At the first house, Harry hesitated, listening. Inside, he heard laughter and childish squeals. Harry smirked and thought, "You won't laugh long. Soon you will be screaming and begging me for mercy."

He glided down the path and stood in front of the door. The mat in front of the door read "Welcome." Irritated, he pointed the wand at the mat and said, "Incendio." He watched in satisfaction as it quickly burned up.

Then, turning his attention to the door, quietly said, "Alohamora." The door clicked open and he went inside.

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Harry woke up hours later. He turned on his side and heaved. His eyes were glazed with the horror of what he had seen Voldemort do. Of what he had done. Harry stared at his own hands. He had tortured

and killed! Yes, it was really Voldemort doing it, but it felt like he had done it. He had felt the thrill of anticipation and the pleasure in the screams. He had felt the joy of throwing the final Killing Curse. These may have been Voldemort's thoughts but they felt as if Harry had been thinking them.

Harry sat up shakily. It was strange, though. When he was forced by the Dementors to relive his most painful memories, he felt drained and ill. He felt as if he were going crazy. When he was living in Voldemort's brain, he felt sickened by what he was experiencing, but his mind was clear. He had escaped the Dementors but at what a price!

"I've found a way to stay sane," Harry thought bitterly. "Sirius escaped by becoming an animagus. I've escaped by entering Voldemort's head. It's too bad he's such a psychopath!" Without thinking, Harry mimicked the wand motion of one of the spells he had seen Voldemort use against the muggle family. He stared with horror at what he was doing. "No! I won't let Voldemort turn me into a psychopath too! I will never need to know that spell."

"How do you know?" asked the sly voice in his head. "You need every advantage you can find. Someday, you'll get out of here and you'll need to be able to kill him."

Harry paced around the room, trying to control his thoughts and to think logically. "Okay. I'm linked to Voldemort. No news flash there. I can jump into his brain and avoid the Dementors. Not a happy alternative but I must do what I must do. While I'm in the crazy lunatic's head, I'm going to see things that I would rather not. I need to turn this to my advantage. I was born to kill him and I can't let anything get in my way."

He slapped a hand against a cold wall, welcoming its rough texture. "Did I think that being a hero would be easy? I imagined crowds cheering me." He shook his head in disgust at his former innocence. "Well, that's not the way it works. I'm going to have to get into Voldemort's brain and learn how he thinks. Learn the spells that I will need to cast to defeat him." He swallowed hard.

“I’m going to do this. I am going to be strong and do this. That’s the only way to stop Voldemort from killing more people.” He could clearly remember the screams from the muggle family Voldemort had killed the night before. “It’s not about whether I’m a hero or not. It’s not about whether the wizarding world deserves for me to save them. Dumbledore was right about one thing: Voldemort has got to be stopped, no matter what.”

Harry took a deep breath. Forcing himself to recall the night before, he stood in the middle of the cold cell and practiced the wand movements to the spells he had seen Voldemort perform. He started with the spell he had automatically been practicing after he awoke from his vision. His hand shook but he forced himself to practice until he was steady. In his head, he repeated the incantation. He continued until he was sure he had mastered every spell perfectly. Then, lying back on the bed, he forced himself to find the tunnel again and, closing his eyes and drawing a ragged breath, he entered it again.

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Chapter Twenty-Two – Year Five; Inside the Belly of the Beast

It was always amusing to hear muggles scream in pain. It filled him with a heady sense of power. He was greater than any god these insignificant beings might worship. After all, it was he, Lord Voldemort, to whom they were praying when they begged for mercy. He was the one who could decide to stop the pain or make it intensify. He, Lord Voldemort, could strike terror in the bravest heart. Cause children to cower, women to weep, and men to abandon hope. He could cause even the strongest to bow before him begging for their lives or the lives of loved ones. And, he was the one who, with a little wave of his wand, could stop their screams of pain or despair forever.

The months since his return to his body were busy. In secret, he had reached out to his natural allies, dark creatures such as the giants, werewolves, and dementors, to solidify his base in preparation for his plan to seize control of the Ministry. Some creatures, such as the goblins and centaurs refused to take sides in what they deemed a human war. While this was infuriating, at least they would not align themselves with the Ministry. And, once he had gained full power, he would teach them the folly of having refused to do his bidding.

As he had worked surreptitiously to recruit more Death Eaters and extend the reach of his power, he enjoyed the occasional foray into the muggle world for some amusement. He also enjoyed keeping his Death Eaters alert and eager to please. He had not forgiven their failure to come to his aid during the years he existed in a non-corporeal form. He was not slow to use the Cruciatus Curse or even, if he chose, the Killing Curse. Let them fear him and know the wrath of their god.

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Harry always found the moment where he “separated” from Voldemort disconcerting. He was leaving one plane of reality for another – where he no longer thought Voldemort’s thoughts, but his own. It usually took him time to process the memories of the past hours, sorting through how Harry felt about what had happened. He worked hard to do this as he was petrified of losing himself inside

Voldemort. He feared that the lines separating him from the Dark Lord might blur.

“I’m the hero; I’m the savior,” he would repeat endlessly. While it was simplistic, it felt like a lifeline – the only constant that he could cling to in a reality that was ever shifting.

Harry dug deeper and deeper into Voldemort’s mind to learn everything he could. The first time Voldemort had shown Harry how to connect to his core magic had been a feeling unlike anything the boy had ever known. It brought with it a sense of power and release that Harry could hardly describe. His body felt energized in a way he had never known. It was as if he had only been using a small portion of his magic and that, even this, had been muffled at best. It wasn’t something that Harry could explain or could imagine that any teacher could teach. Rather, the ability to access his core magic appeared to come naturally for Voldemort. Perhaps this was a talent that all great wizards possessed. Through living in Voldemort’s mind, and sharing his thoughts, Harry was able to replicate the ability to tap into his own inner core.

Harry found that, once he had accessed this core, his magic seemed to hum through his blood. He had no doubt that, with a wand to channel his magic, he would be able to cast more powerful spells than he ever had before. In satisfaction, he thought that Voldemort himself was teaching him the magic he would need to know in order to defeat the Dark Lord.

Each day, Harry absorbed as much of information from Voldemort as he could. Harry noted in some disbelief that, in some areas, Voldemort had very little learning indeed. For instance, Harry had searched for information about elves, since he himself had always been interested in elves after he had met Dobby. But, Voldemort knew almost nothing about them. Harry guessed that Voldemort had no interest in learning about creatures he thought so far beneath the notice of a wizard. Harry, wondering whether this was true of other creatures, poked around in Voldemort’s mind and found his theory confirmed. Voldemort knew little of goblins, centaurs, mermaids and many other creatures Harry found fascinating.

On the other hand, Voldemort knew information about Dark creatures, of which the basilisk was just one example, that Harry thought Hagrid would envy. Harry learned how to speak the language of Dark creatures such as the Chimaera and Lethifold. Harry delved into Voldemort's thoughts and learned parseltongue too. He found the language rather difficult to master, as it was not based in any way on human speech. However, he felt more comfortable learning parseltongue, rather than just inexplicably "knowing" it.

Voldemort was clearly a master of the Dark Arts and Harry learned under his unwitting tutelage. The boy learned spells and incantations for Dark Arts that had not been practiced in centuries. He worried that the spell he had not yet learned would be the one that would see him to victory and, each day, he was eager to enter Voldemort's mind to learn more and more.

In addition to learning from Voldemort's memories, Harry also learned new spells in real time, as Voldemort taught himself. Of course, being Voldemort, many of the new spells focused on how to cause pain and death or what would be useful in a duel. There was *Corpus Incendio*, which caused a person to burst aflame; *Ossis Fracta*, which made all the bones in the body shatter simultaneously; *Echo Magnus*, which caused a greatly magnified spell to rebound against its caster; *Respiro Terminus*, which caused a person to suffocate slowly; *Protego Maximus*, which provided for an enhanced protective shield; and many more. While Voldemort enjoyed practicing his newly invented spells, Harry shuddered as he learned many of them. However, when Voldemort learned to fly without a broom, Harry burned to have a wand to practice doing so as well. While Harry (mentally) accompanied Voldemort in the Dark Lord's broomless flights, Harry preferred the sensation of flying on a broom. But, he wondered whether he would feel differently if he were the one flying, rather than Voldemort.

The boy was even able to learn some limited wandless magic, such as summoning his cot blanket to his hand. But, he knew that it would take months and maybe years more practice before he could master this ability.

He was loath to admit it but learning magic from Voldemort was not the only reason that Harry found himself living large portions of every day in Voldemort's mind. It was like a tooth ache where he couldn't stop his tongue from prodding at the painful spot. Harry found visiting Voldemort's mind strangely intoxicating. He hated it on one level and couldn't avoid it on another. When he wasn't living inside the Dark Lord's thoughts, Harry wondered what Voldemort was doing. He found it was worse to imagine what Voldemort was doing than to witness his atrocities, no matter how heinous.

And, worst of all, there was the insidious knowledge that he visited Voldemort's mind because it offered him a twisted sense of comfort. Voldemort's mind had provided a sort of haven to him, protecting him from the attacks of the Dementors. It was a devil's bargain. Harry now found that he was unable to close his eyes without seeing images of torture and murder Voldemort had seared forever in his memory. To avoid memories of his previous visits to Voldemort's mind, Harry would visit him again. It was like drinking water from a well, knowing that it was enchanted so that, with every sip, the drinker became thirstier. Harry was helpless to stop drinking.

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He knew that some of his Death Eaters, understanding now that their master was more demanding than they had realized (and that they were not protected by their own status as Death Eaters), secretly wondered whether they should abandon their allegiance to him. He was amused. As if they had any choice. Anyone who tried to leave would be killed, as Igor Karkaroff, that fool, had learned. Besides, the Ministry's days were numbered. Soon, he would seize control and the wizarding world would be his to command.

After many months of being able to consolidate his power in relative peace, the Ministry had finally learned that he had returned. He had been foolish to try to enter the Ministry to retrieve that prophecy about Potter and himself. (Where was that boy anyway? It was infuriating that all efforts to find him had failed.) In retrospect, he wondered whether Dumbledore -- that thorn in his side! -- hadn't laid a trap for him. He hadn't been able to hear the prophecy after all and he had almost been caught by Aurors who seemed to have been lying in wait.

The Daily Prophet had actually been able to take a picture of him at the Ministry. With this evidence, even the Minister could not hide his head in the sand any longer and had been forced to admit that the Dark Lord had returned.

He had been furious that he had failed in his effort to retrieve the prophecy, but at least he and his Death Eaters had been able to strike deadly blows that night. When the battle cleared, many Ministry employees, including Amelia Bones, Emmeline Vance, Nymphadora Tonks and Percy Weasley, lay dead. And, a number of people he knew (thanks to Snape) were members of the Order of the Phoenix lay dead as well, such as Sirius Black and Remus Lupin. He knew that Wormtail, at least, had breathed a huge sigh of relief upon learning of their deaths. That treacherous rat had always been afraid that his former friends would track him down and kill him for his betrayal of the Potters.

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Harry stirred fitfully. Slowly, he came awake and shook the remnants of Voldemort's thoughts from his head. Sirius! Lupin! Percy! All dead. He sat on his cot and cried.

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While it was a disappointment that he hadn't been able to retrieve the prophecy, he had learned something of major importance that night at the Ministry. It still made him shudder to think how chance alone had led him to his discovery. As he was battling with the Aurors at the Ministry, the Under Secretary to the Minister had appeared. Dolores Umbridge. Apparently, she was in charge of security measures and had been alerted that there was a breach at the Ministry and had come to check it out. In the midst of battle though he was, he had noticed Umbridge and his eyes had been caught by the pendant hanging from her neck. The locket of Slytherin!

He had grabbed hold of the woman, who had frozen in shock upon seeing him, and had disappeared from the Ministry still holding on to her. He was too busy assessing the damage done by his venture into the Ministry to deal with her right away. But, he had been able to

interrogate her at leisure the next day. Not that it had taken much persuading to make the woman tell him where she had gotten the locket. But, he had enjoyed playing with her even after it was obvious that she had told him everything she knew.

He had learned that the woman had obtained the locket from a common street thief, a Mundungus Fletcher, known as “Dung”. Again, thanks to Snape, he knew that Mundungus was a member of the Order. He had easily captured Dung and had learned that the thief had stolen the locket from the Black House while attending a meeting of the Order.

Of course, he had dispatched both Umbridge and Dung once he had obtained the information he needed from them. Unfortunately, Dung had little other information of value. Dumbledore was not foolish enough to have taken the thief into his confidences. He was only able to confirm what Snape had already told him – that the Order was still desperately trying to find Harry Potter. Fools! Believing that Potter held the key to his defeat.

He caressed the locket hanging around his neck. This locket and his other horcruxes guaranteed that he was invincible. But, it was very disturbing that he had come so close to losing the locket. It still astonished him to realize how it had come to be at the Black House. He had traveled to the cave where he had hidden the locket and discovered the treachery of Regulus Black, who had learned of the secret of the horcrux, and sought to steal it from him. The perfidious creature! If he wasn’t already dead, he would so enjoy killing him! But, after all, the horcrux was safe now. What a fool that boy had been to think he could possibly interfere with the plans of the mighty Lord Voldemort.

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“Disengaging” from Voldemort’s mind, Harry went a little crazy.

Harry grabbed his hair with both hands and started tearing at it. Anyone watching would have thought he had gone stark, staring mad. “Get it out! Get it out!” he screamed repeatedly.

Voldemort was capable of splitting his soul into pieces. And, without needing anyone to explain further, Harry knew – he knew – that he was a horcrux too. It was obvious! How else could he see into Voldemort's mind, feel Voldemort's thoughts? Somehow, without meaning to do so, or realizing that this had happened, Voldemort had left a part of his soul in Harry the night that Voldemort had cast the Killing Curse at Harry's baby self.

The boy ran around the cell, clawing at himself, madly trying to pull Voldemort's soul from his head with his own hands. The Dementors ignored the screaming. It was not unusual for prisoners to go crazy in Azkaban; the boy had lasted longer than expected. In a frenzy, Harry started banging his head into the wall of his cell. Finally, he banged his head so hard, he knocked himself unconscious.

When he awoke, he was nauseous and he lay in a pool of his own sickness. He couldn't focus his eyes and his thoughts were disjointed. The Dementors approached the cell, excited by the despair they could sense overpowering the boy. Harry did not try to escape. He was too horrified of linking with Voldemort again to travel through the "tunnel" back into the Dark Lord's mind.

Sucking in a rattling breath, the Dementors plunged the teenager back into the memory of Voldemort's interrogation of Umbridge. He relived her murder at the Dark Lord's hands and felt again the fear and worry experienced by Voldemort when he had realized that a horcrux had been at risk of being destroyed. He saw himself awaken from that vision to the realization that he was horcrux himself. He relived his mad behavior.

When Harry woke yet again from this seemingly endless loop of despair, he lay still and stared at the ceiling of his cell. He stared at that ceiling for so long, he could recall the particular design of the cracks and swirls with his eyes closed. But, he kept his eyes open and slowly traced each crack, calming himself and centering his thoughts. "My mother loved me. She had faith in me. She knew I was good. He got up off his bed and ran to the cell door. Looking through the bars of the door he shouted, challengingly, "I am not evil! I am a hero!"

No one answered. There were no prisoners near him. He was alone in Azkaban, surrounded by Dementors. Aloud, to hear himself say the words, and to convince himself, he said, "I am not controlled by Voldemort. He may be evil but I am NOT. A piece of his soul may be in me, but I'll cut it out of me somehow."

Shaking, but in control, Harry sat back down on his cot. He muttered to himself, thinking it through, "It's not like when Riddle controlled Ginny. She didn't know what was happening. She'd blank out and wake up hours later. Riddle controlled her body and forced her to open the Chamber of Secrets. Voldemort doesn't even realize that I have a link to him. He's not controlling me. Who knows? Maybe I can control him." Incredibly, Harry felt himself smile at his own dark humor. It felt strange to smile. The muscles of his face had almost forgotten how to pull up. In curiosity, Harry lifted a hand and traced his mouth, feeling the ghost of the smile still there. After a moment, Harry's hand dropped and the smile was a memory.

"He won't defeat me." The words were said with quiet assurance. Hearing them, Harry was surprised. They sounded so sure. It was as if someone other than himself had uttered them. Becoming calmer still, his thoughts sharpened. "This is how he 'marked me as his equal'. That's what Aunt Petunia told me that the prophecy said. This is part of the prophecy," he realized.

He turned over this newfound knowledge in his head for a while. Then, nodding to himself, continued aloud, "I'm going to win." There was a note of surprise in his voice. But, it wasn't because he didn't believe himself. It was because he did. He let the truth settle into him. He burned with the knowledge. It seemed so right.

"I'm going to win," he said again. And, this time, the words were said with utter conviction.

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What to do about the Elder Wand? He had learned from the wand maker, Ollivander (currently a guest in a cell at Malfoy Manor), that Mark Twist's wand had a shared core with his own wand, resulting in

the unusual effect of *Priori Incantatem*. While he knew that Twist's wand had since been destroyed, snapped by the Ministry after Twist had been taken to Azkaban, he no longer felt confident in his own wand. He had pursued the trail of the Elder Wand, which had taken him to the wand maker Gregorovitch, and the imprisoned Grindewald, both of whom he had killed when they were no longer useful to him. He now realized that Dumbledore had possession of the wand.

No matter. He would soon kill Dumbledore and then he, Lord Voldemort, would be the master of the Elder Wand. As it should be. After all, he was the greatest wizard of all time.

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Harry seethed. It had been almost three months since Voldemort had failed to retrieve the prophecy from the Ministry of Magic and the wizarding world had learned of the Dark Lord's return. Yet, Harry was still languishing in Azkaban.

Harry presumed that Fudge refused to clear his name because to do so would be to admit that Voldemort had been behind the murders of Cedric and Moody months before the Ministry had been willing to admit that the Dark Lord had returned. So, instead of telling the truth, the Minister preferred to let an innocent teenager remain in prison.

The Dementors had long since fled to join Voldemort, leaving Azkaban to be patrolled only by Ministry guards. Harry knew that the guards still believed him to be a murderer. In those first days after the human guards had arrived, Harry had often awoken from his ventures into Voldemort's mind to find that his body had been injured during his mental absence. The pain from the kicks he had received made him retreat back into Voldemort's mind and remain there for long periods while his body healed slowly. Eventually, the guards left the unresponsive teen alone, believing him to have been driven insane by the Dementors.

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Of course, he had wanted to assure himself about the safety of the other horcruxes. He had retrieved the ring he had hidden in the

floorboard of the Gaunt house. Bellatrix, who he had released from Azkaban along with her fellow imprisoned Death Eaters, had retrieved Hufflepuff's cup from the Lestrangle vault at Gringott's. Soon, he intended to place these three horcruxes in the secret room at Hogwarts, to join the diadem of Ravenclaw already hidden there. They would all be safest there. But, only he could hide them in the room, since he didn't wish to entrust anyone with the secret of the room's existence. His remaining horcrux, Nagini, he would be careful to keep close by. One of his horcruxes, he knew, was lost forever.

Whenever he thought of his diary, he became as livid as the first time he had learned that Lucius Malfoy had let it out of his possession. When he had asked Lucius to return the diary to him, Lucius had admitted what he had done and how it had been destroyed by Mark Twist. (If that filthy little mudblood wasn't already lying in a cell at Azkaban, having been driven insane by the Dementors before they had abandoned the prison to join the Dark Lord, he would kill the boy now!) In order to show the depth of his displeasure, he had made Lucius' son Draco torture the father. He had forced Draco to use the Cruciatus Curse on his father for so long that Lucius still twitched whenever he saw his son. Well, he hoped that Lucius appreciated his generosity in not killing him straightaway. It was only because he could appreciate Lucius' goal to open the Chamber of Secrets again that he had let him live. But, it had taught him an important lesson. It had been a mistake to trust anyone to safeguard his most valuable of possessions: his horcruxes.

Soon, soon! He would take over the Ministry and take over Hogwarts. When he seized control of the school, he would hide his horcruxes in the secret room, and rest easy about their safety. He would kill the Minister and Dumbledore and his hold on power would be complete. No one could stop him.

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Inside his cell at Azkaban, a young boy ticked off the horcruxes on his fingers and wondered how best to destroy them.

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“Barty Crouch, Jr.? He’s dead,” said the Minister in confusion.

“Apparently not,” said Kingsley Shacklebolt dryly. “He was captured in last night’s battle. We lost three Aurors in the fight, but we were able to kill two Death Eaters and capture Crouch. ”

“But how is this possible?”

“I’m not sure, sir. He has refused to say much, other than that his ‘master’ will save him.” Kingsley’s voice was even but his eyes showed his disdain of Crouch’s “master.”

“Well, make him talk! We need to know everything! How the hell does a man dead for over twelve years suddenly turn up? And, what does he know about what You Know Who is planning?”

“Yes, sir, we’ll make him talk. We are expecting a shipment of veritaserum to arrive shortly. Rufus Scrimgeour will be taking the lead in the interrogation.” Kingsley named the Head of Magical Law Enforcement who had replaced Amelia Bones after that lady had been murdered by Voldemort months ago.

“I want to be present.”

“Of course, sir.”

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Scrimgeour’s interrogation of Crouch was thorough. Under the effects of veritaserum, Crouch explained how his father had helped him escape Azkaban years before. How Crouch Sr. had kept his son under the Imperius Curse to stop him from trying to find the Dark Lord, to whom he remained loyal. How Voldemort, along with Peter Pettigrew (another person who they had thought dead years before!), had freed him from his father’s prison, placing Crouch Sr. under the Imperius Curse instead. How he had impersonated Alastor Moody so as to take his place as Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher at Hogwarts with the intention of entering Mark Twist into the Triwizard Tournament. How he had killed Crouch Sr., burying his body on

Hogwarts grounds. How he had turned the Triwizard Cup into a Portkey which had transported Twist to Voldemort's side where the boy's blood had been used to restore Voldemort to his body. How Pettigrew on Voldemort's orders had killed Diggory. How Twist had escaped Voldemort but that Crouch had killed Moody, framing Twist for the murder.

Unfortunately, Crouch didn't have much information about Voldemort's war plans. The Dark Lord was not the type to share his thoughts with even his most loyal followers. Crouch was able to tell them that Voldemort was planning on taking over the Ministry and purging the wizarding world of muggleborns, but this nothing new. He had no information about the "how" Voldemort intended to accomplish his goals.

After the interrogation, the men were silent for a long time.

Finally, Fudge said reluctantly, "What a disaster."

Kingsley was startled. "What do you mean, Minister?"

Scrimgeour, looking grim, answered for Fudge. "How do we tell everyone that the Ministry was wrong not once, but twice, and locked up innocent wizards while You Know Who's supporters walked free? How do we tell them that Black was innocent after all, just as Dumbledore told us after Black was killed during the Battle?" Within the Ministry, the night that Voldemort had tried to retrieve the prophecy and had killed a number of Ministry workers during his escape was referred to simply as "the Battle".

Fudge continued. "You remember, when we realized that You Know Who had returned, and everyone was so panicked, it was important to have little bit of good news. People were relieved that at least Black was finally caught and killed."

"And, now we tell everyone that Black was innocent and his death was actually yet another blow to our side. That Pettigrew was the murderer and he's still at large." Scrimgeour shook his head at the terrible news.

“What about Twist?” demanded Kingsley. “He’s still in Azkaban.”

“He’s the worst of it,” admitted Scrimgeour. “How do we tell everyone that an innocent boy is in Azkaban and there wasn’t even a trial?”

Fudge shifted uncomfortably. He recalled guiltily how Dumbledore had tried to convince him to release Twist once it was known that Voldemort had returned to power. Fudge had refused, arguing (as Dumbledore himself had said when Twist had first claimed Voldemort had framed him) that there was still no proof that Twist hadn’t killed Diggory and Moody. Now, Fudge said slowly, “We don’t tell.”

“What?!” demanded Kingsley in shock. Scrimgeour was silent but shot a piercing look at Fudge.

Fudge straightened and his face took on a belligerent, defensive look. “It doesn’t matter now to Twist whether or not he’s released. He’s already insane. What good would it do to tell everyone that we were wrong? It would just...demoralize them.”

Kingsley stared at Fudge in disbelief and shock.

Scrimgeour, looking slightly disapproving, was more pragmatic. “We’ll need to tell everyone something. After all, we’ve captured Crouch and it’s a mistake to hide that.”

Fudge looked down at the slack-jawed man, sitting quietly in a chair in the cell now that the interrogation was over. “We can dispose of him.”

Scrimgeour appeared to consider this plan. Kingsley’s eyes burned with fury but he held his tongue, waiting to see what would be decided. Finally, Scrimgeour said, “We are digging ourselves deeper into a problem. There are ramifications to our catching Crouch that we won’t know right away. He may be able to provide us with more information, so I don’t recommend killing him. At least, not yet. I think we can tell the public that Crouch was caught and confessed to Moody’s murder without stirring them up too much. We’ll have the

Daily Prophet write a small article and bury it in the back pages of an issue. Most people won't even read it. That way, we're covered in that we disclosed the truth."

Fudge looked unconvinced. "And do we tell about Pettigrew too?"

Scrimgeour nodded. "We have to. What if we catch him? Or, he's spotted by someone? It can't come out that he's alive and working for You Know Who and that we didn't tell anyone."

Looking worried, Fudge asked, "But won't there be a backlash against the Ministry for this?"

"I think we can have the Daily Prophet spin the article as we want it. Instead of focusing on the mistakes, we can focus on the fact that we were successful in capturing a Death Eater. And, not just any Death Eater. Obviously one of You Know Who's inner circle."

Kingsley spoke up, his voice tight. "And Twist?"

Scrimgeour didn't respond to the censure he perceived in Kingsley's voice. With composure, he said, "We'll send someone to Azkaban right away to release Twist. He'll be taken to St. Mungo's and cared for there. There's nothing further we can do for him."

Fudge nodded and said, "All right. Let's do it. Scrimgeour, you give Rita Skeeter a call, I'll speak with Dumbledore. I want to let him know that we're moving Twist to St. Mungo's. Kingsley, you take care of the logistics of moving Twist."

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Harry had been resting on his cot in his cell when his head suddenly exploded with the pain of Voldemort's fury. He found himself sucked quickly, and uncontrollably, through the tunnel in his mind and into Voldemort's thoughts.

Crouch had been captured! Harry felt his robes whish around his legs as he strode furiously around the chamber. He paced the large, dimly lit room where a number of Death Eaters followed him with worried

eyes, afraid that he would lash out at them in his fury over the capture of one of his favorites.

“Where is he being kept?” he demanded of Nott, who was kneeling on the cold floor, having just delivered the news to the Dark Lord.

“I...I don’t know, My Lord,” admitted Nott, trembling.

“Find out!”

“Y..y..yes, sir, of course.” At the gesture from his master, Nott rose and left the room.

Harry’s eyes fell on Draco. The blond teenager was standing in the far side of the room, trying to escape notice. What a disappointment the boy was. He had seemed to have all the makings of a Death Eater, but he lacked the killer instinct. He was the same age now as Barty Crouch had been when Barty had first entered his service. What a difference! The teenage Barty had embraced being a Death Eater.

Draco sensed the Dark Lord’s eyes upon him and trembled. “Crucio!” yelled Harry. He watched with cold eyes as the boy screamed and writhed on the floor. After a short while, he lifted the curse and watched impatiently as the teenager recovered, panting on the ground.

The other Death Eaters held their breaths, hoping that the Dark Lord would not turn his attention on them. Harry’s eyes swept the room, burning red and hard. “Soon,” he hissed. His followers twitched. “Soon, we will move on the Ministry and bring it to its knees. And anyone who stands in my way will feel my wrath!”

A few of the braver Death Eaters muttered, “Yes, My Lord.”

Bellatrix, looking at him adoringly, chanced more. “My Lord. The day cannot come too soon!”

Her adoration was amusing. However, while Harry smirked at the woman's obvious infatuation for him, he found the hero-worship soothing. He felt his fury move from a boil to a slow simmer. "Yes, Bellatrix," he purred. She shivered in pleasure at being addressed by him. "And after the Ministry, Hogwarts will fall, and the last bastion of resistance against me will be defeated. I will reign supreme."

A current of excitement ran through the Death Eaters.

"Soon!" the Dark Lord promised. "Soon."

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Dumbledore looked sadly down at the sleeping boy. The boy had dark circles under his eyes and he was far too thin. With Voldemort's attacks on the rise, the healers at St. Mungo's were overworked and not very interested in attending a patient who was catatonic. However, at Dumbledore's insistence, they had performed a cursory exam of the teenager and had healed the most obvious harms, such as resetting broken bones that had not mended properly. This evidence of the abuse that the boy had suffered during his months in Azkaban made Dumbledore sick and furious.

While the boy's eyes were closed now, Dumbledore remembered how those eyes had burned as they had looked at him so accusingly. With a heavy heart, the old wizard recalled as clearly as if it were yesterday how the boy had stood so proudly, like a little prince, and told the headmaster that he would never forgive him.

"Mark?" No reaction from the boy.

Tentatively, Dumbledore probed at the teenager's mind. He hit a wall. Nothing. There were no thoughts from the boy at all. Dumbledore wondered fleetingly, with a lurch of fear, if the boy's soul had been sucked from his body by the Dementors before those foul creatures had fled Azkaban. Then, he reminded himself that this couldn't be the case... the doctors had told him that Mark functioned in a limited capacity, using the bathroom, and eating his meals. Otherwise, however, Mark appeared to be completely unaware of his

surroundings and did not respond to any of the attempts to communicate with him.

But, while his soul may not have been stolen by the Dementors, it was clear that his mind had been. The boy was completely non-responsive. It was too late to save him.

Dumbledore told himself, as he had numerous times before, that this boy was just another of Voldemort's victims. Why, on this very ward were the Longbottoms, who had been driven insane during Voldemort's first rise to power. Even after years of therapy, the Healers had not been able to repair the damage done to their minds.

Yes, Mark was no different from the many muggles and witches and wizards whose lives Voldemort had destroyed either in the past or in the Dark Lord's current rise to power. But, Dumbledore couldn't convince himself. The loss of this boy seemed more tragic. As if Voldemort had won a major battle. Dumbledore lightly patted Mark's hand, which was resting above the blanket. "I'm sorry," he said, as he had done the night he had rejected the boy's pleas for help. It seemed as inadequate now as it had then. Sighing heavily, Dumbledore turned away from the sleeping teenager. Depressed and disheartened, he returned to Hogwarts.

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Harry awoke in a comfortable bed, with a fluffy pillow under his head. He looked around in amazement. What had happened?

The room had no windows. There were only three walls; a curtain hung on the fourth side of the small room. The bed's blanket and sheets and the walls of the room were all the sterile white of hospitals.

Harry leaned his head back on his pillow. He was sure he was at St. Mungo's. He had been moved from Azkaban while he was inside Voldemort's thoughts. He knew from his last visit to Voldemort's mind that Crouch had been captured. Crouch had obviously confessed to killing Moody and explained how Diggory had died, clearing Mark Twist. The Ministry had finally released him from Azkaban. About time!

Harry wondered what he should do now that he was out of Azkaban. Should he demand a wand and search out Voldemort? He sat up in bed. He was dressed in new pajamas and had been bathed while he had been unconscious. He sniffed at his arm. He smelled fresh and clean. It was wonderful.

On the endtable next to the bed were his glasses. They had been broken for most of the time Harry had been in Azkaban. Now, they sat on the table in silent encouragement for him to get well. With tremendous relief, Harry put them on. He had missed being able to see clearly.

He climbed out of bed and took a few steps. Wait. Everyone, including Voldemort, thought he was insane. Maybe he should continue to let them think this. If Voldemort realized that Mark Twist had been able to survive Azkaban, would he come after him? Would everyone wonder how Twist had survived? Wasn't it still the best strategy not to attract attention?

He stretched his body. He had tried to exercise every day in Azkaban. But, his muscles were still weak. He would wait and see what to do. Let everyone continue to think that he was catatonic. He could use some time to regain his strength and carefully plan what to do. Soon he would meet Voldemort. Soon.

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Chapter Twenty-Three - Year Five; The Duel

In the weeks following Harry's release from Azkaban, he pretended to be catatonic even when he was not living in Voldemort's mind. He was usually left alone but, a few times a day, different nurses would check on him, calling his name but not expecting him to respond. Harry memorized the times of their rounds, and was careful to be quietly resting when they came by. Healer visits were rare, and Harry was easily able to avoid attracting their notice when they did take a quick look at him.

Whenever he was left alone, Harry exercised his body, pushing himself as hard as he could to recover his strength. More importantly than his physical exercises, Harry exercised his mental defenses. He had been worried that, whenever Voldemort was feeling an intense emotion, particularly anger, he was sucked through the tunnel into Voldemort's thoughts whether he wanted to be there or not. Eventually, Harry thought, he and Voldemort would have a showdown and, unless he could kill Voldemort while the Dark Lord was sleeping (and how likely was that?!), Harry would be sucked into Voldemort's mind, leaving his own body defenseless. If Harry couldn't control whether or not he entered that tunnel in his mind, how could he hope to defeat Voldemort?

Each day, Harry practiced trying to control whether or not he entered the tunnel linking him to Voldemort and the length of time he stayed in Voldemort's thoughts. The more intense Voldemort's emotions, the harder it was for Harry to shut off the link between the Dark Lord and himself and stay in his own present. With Crouch captured by the Ministry, Harry had no lack of opportunity to practice. Voldemort was angry for days on end and his fury acted as a vacuum, trying to suction Harry into the Dark Lord's mind.

Voldemort's temper was razor thin and the Death Eaters lived in terror of displeasing their master. Harry thought that, ironically, when he killed Voldemort (which of course, he would do), it wouldn't surprise him if some of the Death Eaters cheered loudest of all. They may have wanted a world without muggleborns, but Voldemort was as likely to kill a Death Eater as any muggleborn. "Serves them right," Harry thought to himself. It was a twisted sort of justice.

About a month after Harry had arrived at St. Mungo's, Voldemort attacked the Ministry. Harry had had no notice. He was visiting Voldemort's mind when Nott told the Dark Lord that he had just learned that Crouch was being secured at the Ministry but that the Ministry was planning to transport Crouch to a different location that night. Without further notice, Voldemort rounded up his Death Eaters and attacked the Ministry.

Harry left Voldemort's thoughts and jumped out of bed. He stood next to his hospital bed, leaning against it, and gathered his thoughts. His heart pounded and his mouth was dry. Was this it? The battle he was destined to have with Voldemort? Harry looked down at his empty hand. He had no wand. Without a wand, what could he do? The Ministry was already under attack. There was no one to warn. It had happened so quickly.

In frustration, he re-entered Voldemort's mind to see what was happening. Nott and his Death Eater colleagues had done their job well. Voldemort and his followers were able to infiltrate the Ministry easily. Within just a few hours, the Ministry had fallen, Fudge was killed, and Ministry officials by the score lay dead. The survivors were captured or fled the building, leaving Voldemort in possession.

In victory, an ecstatic Voldemort released Crouch from the cell where he had been held for the past month. The Death Eater fell at his Master's feet, kissing the hem of his robe. "I knew you would come, My Lord," he breathed in worship.

Harry pulled back from Voldemort's thoughts. He couldn't believe what he had just witnessed. A coup! Voldemort had taken over the Ministry!

What should he, Harry, do? He was supposed to defeat Voldemort. He was supposed to be the savior. But, Voldemort had just brought down the Ministry. All those people killed! Nothing Harry did now would bring those people back. He had waited too long. He should have figured out a way to get a wand. He should have made his move against Voldemort before. It was all his fault.

Stop! Harry told himself. This type of thinking was exactly what Voldemort thrived on. It was not Harry's fault that these people had died. It was Voldemort's fault. Each person killed or harmed was just one more reason why it was so important for Harry to defeat Voldemort. He would conquer Voldemort when the time was right. Unfortunately, until that day, Voldemort would spread his poison of death and despair. But, Voldemort's reign would come to an end. His days were numbered. Because it was only a matter of time before Harry killed him.

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Voldemort moved to consolidate his power. His Death Eater squads rounded up and imprisoned any wizards not loyal to him. Any creatures who refused to join him – such as goblins and centaurs – were indiscriminately slaughtered. Known blood traitors and muggleborns went into hiding or ran to the safety of Hogwarts, the last bastion of resistance. The remnants of the Ministry fled there as well, using it as their base, and trying to regroup. With Fudge dead, Rufus Scrimgeour was serving as interim Minister.

Dumbledore permitted any student who wished to leave Hogwarts to do so. A number of purebloods did leave, believing that, under Voldemort's regime, they'd be safer away from Hogwarts. The majority of students remained, with their families electing to join them at Hogwarts. While the adults worried that it was only a matter of time before Voldemort attacked Hogwarts, there seemed to be safety in numbers.

"It's like a refugee camp," muttered Scrimgeour, looking out over the assorted groups eating dinner about two weeks after the Ministry had fallen to Voldemort.

Dumbledore, sitting next to the interim Minister, followed Scrimgeour's eyes. The Great Hall was host to about double the number of its usual occupants. Little children played in one corner of the room, in a makeshift nursery, while parents and grandparents joined students at the house tables. Food was simple as the house elves were stretched thin catering to so many guests.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. And I expect that more will come. It is lucky that Hogwarts is so big; housing shouldn't be a problem. But, I am concerned about food. If Voldemort puts us under siege, we may quickly run out of food."

Scrimgeour looked alarmed. "Do you think that's what he'll do?"

Dumbledore looked grave. "It is one of a number of unpleasant possibilities. Certainly, he will be looking for ways to bring Hogwarts to its knees."

Scrimgeour was silent for a minute. Then, his voice low so that Dumbledore could hardly hear him, he said, "The situation is looking very bleak."

Before Dumbledore could respond, there was a commotion at the entrance to the Great Hall. Death Eaters poured into the Hall. There were screams and shouts as the adults realized what was happening. Scrimgeour, Dumbledore, and a number of the Aurors, wands in hand, rose abruptly and faced the Death Eaters.

"Hold your spells!" called a high, cold voice. Voldemort strode into the room. He had his snake, Nagini, draped around his shoulders. Children started crying but the adults froze.

Voldemort strode to the front of the Great Hall, until he was facing Dumbledore and Scrimgeour. He smiled coldly at them both. "Put down your wands," he ordered. "Look around you. If you fight me now, see how many innocent lives will be lost."

Dumbledore looked quickly at the Death Eaters lining the perimeter of the Hall. Their wands were pointing at the children.

"You will kill them anyway," accused Scrimgeour.

Voldemort smirked. "Some of them...maybe," Voldemort admitted. "But, wizard blood is precious. I will let most of them live. But, if you fight me, many more will die."

Slowly, Scrimgeour and Dumbledore lowered their wands. There were gasps throughout the Hall and a few scattered cries of "No!" Voldemort smiled. He raised his own wand and said, "Expelliarmus." The Minister's and headmaster's wands flew into the air and the Dark Lord caught them easily. He laughed a cold laugh.

Pocketing his own wand and Scrimgeour's, Voldemort caressed the wand that had previously been Dumbledore's. Nagini uncurled and slithered down Voldemort's body to the floor, where he curled around the foot of the head table. "Finally," Voldemort whispered. "The Elder Wand is mine. I am unbeatable!" He laughed joyfully. Then, turning the wand on to Dumbledore, Voldemort shouted, "Crucio!"

Immediately, the headmaster fell down, writhing and screaming on the ground. Children started screaming and crying louder and some of the adults made to come to Dumbledore's aid, but were halted by the Death Eaters' wands pointing at them.

Cackling wildly, Voldemort lifted the curse. Panting heavily, Dumbledore got to his feet, assisted by Scrimgeour. Some of the other teachers would have come to him as well, but Voldemort gestured threateningly with his wand for them to stay where they were. Professors McGonagall and Sprout were crying. Professor Flitwick looked glassy-eyed, as if he were in shock.

Professor Snape, eyes glittering, held himself rigidly still. He knew that there was nothing he could do to save Dumbledore but he had to force himself not to react. He was devastated that, after all his years as a spy, he had not known that Hogwarts was to be attacked that night. But, since Snape had already been positioned at Hogwarts, Voldemort had not seen the necessity to summon the potions master to him to tell him of the plan to invade the school.

"You're an evil madman," said Scrimgeour, his voice tight. He knew that he and Dumbledore, and many other brave men and women, would soon be killed by Voldemort. He only hoped that Voldemort would spare the children. He stood up straight and refused to show fear.

“Madman, am I?” sneered Voldemort. “Still clever enough to enter Hogwarts under your very noses.”

Neither Scrimgeour nor Dumbledore wanted to give him the satisfaction of asking how he had managed to do this. But, Voldemort didn't wait for them to question him. “I will tell you before I kill you,” he taunted. “There is a cabinet in the room above the caretaker's office that forms a magical pathway with its twin, housed in the Borgin & Burkes shop in Diagon Alley. I learned of the cabinet when I was fresh out of school, first working at Borgin's. I always knew that once I defeated the Ministry, that I would be able to take down Hogwarts by penetrating it from within. All I had to do was just walk right in. And, once I was in, it was a simple matter to bring down the wards.” Voldemort laughed again, in triumph.

Dumbledore clenched his jaw. This was it. The end. Voldemort had won.

Voldemort turned to face everyone. “I am your ruler now! I am supreme! No one can stop me!”

Death Eater cheers mingled with the cries of little children and the sobs of the older students and some adults.

“Actually,” said a clear, strong voice from the entrance to the Great Hall, “I can stop you and I will!”

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Harry had been visiting Voldemort's mind when the Dark Lord had first entered Borgin & Burkes. Reading Voldemort's thoughts, Harry learned that Voldemort was going to invade Hogwarts and complete his plan for domination of the wizarding world in Britain. Harry forced himself to withdraw from the tunnel linking him to Voldemort. It was very difficult to do so, since the Dark Lord's emotions were riding high. After “separating” from Voldemort, Harry had to catch his breath.

He had to get to Hogwarts! He forced himself not to think about Ron, Hermione, Ginny or any of his other friends. The way to protect them

was to defeat Voldemort. He simply could not let Hogwarts fall to Voldemort. This was it! Today was the day he would bring down Voldemort! There was no doubt in his mind.

As he had realized when performing the three tasks in the Triwizard Tournament, waiting was always the hardest part. Now that the time to confront Voldemort had finally arrived, Harry was not frightened. He felt a sense of utter calm and certainty. His thinking was clear; he knew what he was going to do as if he had spent months planning.

He climbed out of bed and quickly put on his glasses. Harry pulled back a small section of the curtain separating his bed from the rest of the ward. The ward was sectioned into other similarly curtained off areas. In some, the curtains were drawn back and patients could look up and see Harry. But, these poor witches and wizards paid no attention to the boy. They rested in their beds and stared blankly at the ceiling or sat in chairs scattered around the room and stared equally blankly at the floor. No one even turned in Harry's direction. It was dinnertime; the nurse on duty was in the far corner helping one of the other patients eat. Her back was to Harry and she didn't notice him at all.

Quietly, the teen crossed to his nearest neighbor and opened the closet in that patient's "room". Harry took out a robe hanging there and pulled it on.

Harry looked over at the nurse whose back was to him. Her hands were busy holding a spoon and bowl as she encouraged a patient to eat. The Summoning Charm was one of the few wandless spells Harry had learned from Voldemort. Silently, Harry called, "Accio wand!" The nurse's wand flew out of her pocket and into Harry's hand. She didn't even notice that it was gone.

Harry gripped the wand and closed his eyes for a brief moment. He had forgotten – or had not allowed himself to remember – the warm flow of energy that came from holding a wand. He had missed this!

Silently, the barefoot Harry went out of the room and down the corridor. At the end of the corridor was a heavy door, which was kept locked to prevent the patients from wandering. Harry whispered,

“Alohamora!” and it opened with a click. Harry went down the stairwell, rather than taking the elevator, to avoid meeting anyone. He quickly reached the lobby and, casting a disillusionment spell on himself, went through the front door. Once outside the hospital, Harry found himself on a muggle street. The pavement felt cold against his bare feet.

Giving a mental probe, Harry confirmed his suspicions that the wards protecting St. Mungo’s did not extend beyond the building itself. Free of the anti-apparition wards, Harry gave a quick twist and apparated outside the gates of Hogwarts.

Harry’s heart gave a great lurch when he looked up at the castle. It seemed a lifetime ago that he had been there. He wasn’t sure how he felt. It was where he had lived some of his happiest memories but it was also where he had been most vilified. It was a haven and a hell.

Pulling his eyes from the castle, Harry looked at the gates protecting the grounds. The gates were open! The wards had already been dropped and the Death Eaters were even now inside! He had to hurry!

He entered the gates and ran across the grounds, the cold grass numbing his feet. He stumbled over a rock and fell down, scraping his knees and hands. Forcing himself to slow down, he tried to fly in the manner he and Voldemort had recently learned together – without a broom. It was a strange sensation and Harry wasn’t sure he liked it. He didn’t feel comfortable flying high above the ground, so he let his feet hover just a few inches above the grass. By gliding in this manner, he reached the front doors in minutes.

Slipping inside, he hesitated. He wanted to make his way to the Great Hall right away but he knew that he had something he had to do first. Working as quickly as possible, it was still over half an hour before he was able to return to the Great Hall.

There were two guards standing at attention flanking either side of the doors to the Great Hall. They didn’t turn at Harry’s approach and he remembered that he was still invisible, under the disillusionment charm. And, since he was hovering over the surface of the floor, they

couldn't hear any footsteps. Silently, Harry pointed his wand and thought, "Stupefy!" and the guards fell to the ground unconscious.

He entered the Great Hall and heard Voldemort explain how he had entered Hogwarts through the twin cabinets. As he entered the Hall, he felt the disillusionment charm Voldemort must have cast some protective spells so that people couldn't use invisibility to enter the Hall without his knowing. But, no one noticed Harry as they were all looking at Voldemort. Voldemort had just turned to face everyone. He was lifting his arms in victory and proclaiming, "I am your ruler now! I am supreme! No one can stop me!"

Death Eater cheers mingled with the cries of little children and the sobs of the older students and some adults.

Here was the moment, thought Harry. This was truly it. He was going to confront Voldemort at last. "Actually," he said, standing in the entrance to the Great Hall, "I can stop you and I will!"

Reaching deep inside to his magical core, Harry grabbed hold of that energy. He took advantage of the momentary shock of his pronouncement to point his wand into the center of the Great Hall and shout, "Expelliarmus!" Hundreds of wands – from Death Eaters, parents, students, teachers, and anyone else in the Hall-- flew toward him. Anticipating this, he quickly conjured a huge trunk, lid open, to sit on the floor next to him. He directed the wands toward the trunk and, as soon as all the wands had flown inside, Harry waved his wand and the lid slammed shut and locked with a deafening clank. The wands were sealed inside.

Only Voldemort still clutched his wand. Only the Dark Lord was clever enough, or paranoid enough, to keep a protective shield around himself at all times. The Expelliarmus spell had not worked on him.

A few of the Death Eaters closest to Harry, including Bellatrix Lestrange and the Death Eater he recognized as Nott, tried to grab him. He whipped his wand through the air and they were thrown backwards into the wall, where they slid to the floor, unconscious. A number of the adults sitting at the house tables started to rise.

Voldemort shouted, "No one move! The first person who moves is dead!" The room froze.

Slowly Voldemort walked down to the center of the Hall. He halted, looking directly at Harry. "Who dares to oppose me? Approach!"

Harry silently strengthened the protective shield he had cast around himself before he had entered the Hall. Slowly, but without hesitation, he moved up the center aisle of the Hall, approaching Voldemort. When he was close enough that Voldemort could see him clearly, the boy stopped and looked boldly at the Dark wizard.

"Mark!" Harry gazed quickly at the Gryffindor table at the group of students who had involuntarily called out his name. Ginny and Ron had their hands over their mouths, as if trying to force the word back in. Hermione was flushed and crying. The Weasley twins were looking shocked. Harry was vaguely aware that their parents were sitting with them, but his attention was all for Voldemort now.

"Mark Twist?" Voldemort asked in surprise. "I thought you were lying in St. Mungo's --insane!"

Harry smiled. "No. I am perfectly sane, and here to kill you."

From his vantage point at the head table, Dumbledore watched and felt his head reeling. How was it that Mark Twist was here? He, himself, had seen the boy at St. Mungo's, completely catatonic. And, yet, here he was. Battling Voldemort.

Voldemort hissed. "Mudblood! You think you, a mudblood, can kill me? Me! The greatest wizard of all time! I will swat you like a fly!"

"Like Cedric Diggory?" asked Harry his voice razor sharp.

"Who? I don't know who Diggory is. Another mudblood?"

Harry drew an angry breath. "No. He was a pureblood. He was the boy you killed when we were both transported to you after touching the Triwizard Cup. He was a better person than you could ever hope

to be. But, he was an inconvenience to you and you killed him without a second thought. The way you have killed so many others.”

“I am above these petty concerns, boy. Why should I care about Diggory or any others I have killed? Who do you think you are to question me?”

Harry clenched his jaw. Through his teeth, he said, “I am the one who is going to stop you.”

Voldemort’s eyes burned red. “You foolish boy. You think that, because you were able to escape me before, you can defeat me? At our last meeting, our wands connected because they shared a common core, and the *priori incantatem* spell saved you. But, your wand has since been destroyed and I have exchanged my old wand for this one.” He held up the wand he had taken from Dumbledore. “This is the Elder Wand. Its master is unbeatable and I am its master.”

“I don’t care what wand you have,” said Harry. “I was born to kill you and I have waited all my life for this moment.”

Finally, after five long years, he lifted the glamour charm and the crowd watched, astounded, as the boy transformed in front of them. His hair turned black and messy. His nose shortened and his jaw became squarer. He grew taller and thinner. In a moment, a handsome young boy, not quite 16 years old, stood facing Voldemort. Behind his glasses, his vivid, emerald green eyes burned fiercely. Harry pushed back the hair on his forehead and his famous lightning-shaped scar was clearly visible.

Voldemort froze. “Harry Potter,” he breathed. His words, though quiet, easily reached every corner of the room. The very walls of the Great Hall seemed to shudder and hold their breath.

Dumbledore, who had been standing until this time, sat heavily down in his chair. His legs no longer could support him. Harry Potter! Here! Mark Twist was Harry Potter. The headmaster tried to get his mind around this revelation. But, one burning thought kept pushing itself to

the front of his brain. The prophecy! Harry Potter was here at last and he was the one with the power to defeat the Dark Lord. Could their imminent defeat at the hands of Lord Voldemort actually turn completely around and would tonight end with Voldemort's death instead?

Harry stood proudly in front of Voldemort, not replying. Harry radiated authority and strength. To the watching witches and wizards who had been afraid of dying just moments before, he seemed like a warrior Prince.

Voldemort had turned pale with anger and fear. Unbeknownst to the Dark Lord, Harry struggled not to be sucked into the tunnel in his head. "Your mother's sacrifice bought you fifteen more years, Potter. But, today is the day that I finish what I planned to do all those years ago." Voldemort raised his wand higher. While it was clear what he intended to do, and the audience watching caught their breaths, Harry actually lowered his wand, waiting. Incensed at this display of bravado by the teen, Voldemort hesitated no longer. He shouted, "Avada Kedavra!" and a blast of green light issued from his wand.

Harry did not try to evade the spell. He had known that Voldemort would cast the Killing Curse and, indeed, had been counting on just that happening. With a slight smile on his face, he took the blast straight on. He was vaguely aware of screams in the background but, when the spell hit him, he was aware of nothing more.

At first, everything was dark. Slowly, Harry noticed a point of bright light that seemed to spread the longer he looked at it. While the light blinded him momentarily, his eyes eventually became accustomed to the radiance and he realized he was not alone. Standing in front of him were two shadowy figures whose features slowly came into focus. He caught his breath as he realized that it was Lily and James Potter.

"Mom! Dad!" he breathed.

They smiled at him proudly. His mother was crying. Harry lurched forward and tried to hug them, but his arms went through them. They were as insubstantial as ghosts. He let out a cry of loneliness and pain.

“Harry,” said his father. “You cannot touch us because we are already in the world beyond.”

“But aren’t I dead?” Harry demanded. “Voldemort killed me! I knew he had to kill me in order to destroy the horcrux in me.”

“We are so proud of you, son,” said Lily. “You sacrificed yourself to defeat Voldemort. You are brave and good.”

Harry felt his heart swell with emotion. Here was the praise he had waited his whole life to hear.

James continued. “But you are not dead. You are not alive either. You have the choice now whether to go back or to come with us.”

“I want to come with you!” said Harry without hesitation.

Lily’s tears flowed more heavily. “Oh, son. We love you but we don’t want you to join us now. Go back and live your life. There will be time in the future, when you are an old man, to join us.”

“No!” said Harry. “There’s nothing for me back there. I want to stay with you!”

James looked sad now. “Harry, we want you to have a good life. We died to protect you so that you could live. But, even if you don’t want to go back for yourself, think about the people Voldemort will hurt if you don’t finish your task.”

Harry hesitated and then, in a voice that he feared contained more than a hint of desperation said, “Why must it be me? Why must I go back?”

“You are the only one who has the chance to kill him now. Yes, he might be killed in the future since you have helped pave the way. But, what about all the harm Voldemort can do before then, all the people he can kill, if you don’t stop him today?”

Harry started to feel a hard knot of grief form in his stomach. "I don't want to leave you. I love you."

Lily let out a wail of pain.

Trying to find a way to remain, Harry thought of a reason why he couldn't return. "How can I go back anyway? Voldemort cast the Killing Curse. Why am I not dead?"

"Because you and Voldemort anchored each other to the living world. A piece of Voldemort's soul was encased in you all these years and you, along with his other horcruxes, helped keep him from death. The opposite is also true. Voldemort keeps you tied to life since you are encased in him."

"Me? Encased in Voldemort? What do you mean?" Harry's voice rose shrilly. He always hated the idea of any part of Voldemort in him. The idea that a piece of him was in Voldemort too was horrifying.

"Don't be alarmed, Harry," soothed his mother. "You already knew this. You remember when Voldemort stole your blood the night he made a potion to return to his body?"

"Yes," said Harry slowly.

"Well, your blood flowing through Voldemort's veins acted in somewhat the same way as a horcrux for you. While Voldemort lives, he anchors you to the living world."

"I don't understand," said Harry. "It can't be that anyone can create a horcrux just by stealing a little blood from another wizard. Then no one would ever die!"

James shook his head. "We're not explaining this very well. The magic is very subtle. It wasn't just that you gave your blood to Voldemort. It was that this blood was used in a spell to create Voldemort's new body. So, your blood is intrinsically linked to Voldemort's very existence."

“So he anchors me?” asked Harry, trying to understand.

Lily and James nodded. “That’s right,” said his mother.

“The important thing to understand is that, when Voldemort tried to kill you tonight, his curse killed that piece of his soul that was in you. You no longer anchor him to the living world,” James explained.

Harry smiled wryly, “Everything he did to try to kill me actually rebounded on him, didn’t it?”

Lily smiled back but it didn’t reach her eyes, which still shown with her tears. “I love you, Harry.” She turned and started to walk away, heading toward a tunnel in the distance that blazed with such bright light that it blinded Harry when he looked in its direction.

“I love you too, son,” whispered James. He turned to follow his wife.

“No, don’t go!” yelled Harry. He ran a few steps toward where his parents had stood but they were already gone. Harry stopped. He knew that he could follow them and enter the white tunnel through which they had disappeared. If he did so, he would be reunited with his parents and he wouldn’t have to worry about psychopathic evil wizards any more. Harry felt tears sliding down his cheeks.

“It’s not fair!” he yelled into the air. He sat down heavily on the ground and wiped the tears from his face. “It’s not fair,” he muttered again. “I want to stay with them.”

As if his mother were whispering in his ear, he heard her say, “We want you to have a good life, Harry. Try to be happy.”

Harry breathed heavily and, finally, nodded in decision. “I will return,” he said. Impatiently, he wiped the tears from his face. “I will finish killing Voldemort and then I’ll be free. I will try to be happy, as my parents wanted me to be. I’ll find something to live for. And, if I don’t find it, I’ll join my parents then.”

Taking a deep breath, Harry forced himself to focus on the Great Hall, and imagining himself back there. Soon, it was a reality and he felt the hard stone floor beneath his body. He had been thrown on the ground by the force of the Killing Curse. Slowly, he stirred and he heard people shouting around him, "He's alive! Potter is alive! It didn't kill him!"

Slowly, he raised his head and looked toward Voldemort. The spell had apparently knocked the Dark Lord off of his feet as well. He was being helped to his feet by some of his supporters, but he was angrily shrugging away their assistance. He was still clutching the Elder Wand he had seized from Dumbledore but the other wands that had been in his robe had fallen to the ground. Harry saw Barty Crouch seize Scrimgeour's and Draco Malfoy scooped up Voldemort's old wand.

Voldemort ignored his supporters. He looked toward Harry and his eyes were glowing red.

Harry quickly scrambled to his feet, clutching his wand. Shrugging, he smirked at Voldemort, knowing that he was angering the older wizard. "You forget, Tom. I am the Boy-Who-Lived," he taunted.

Voldemort shook with anger. "You are not immortal. And, you can be hurt." Swishing his wand swiftly through the air, he cried, "Crucio!"

Harry ducked and the spell flew over his head. "Temper, temper," Harry scolded. "I'm surprised at you, Tom. Really I am. After all these years, and all the times we've met. What is it now? Four times before tonight? And, you have nothing you want to ask me? You're not curious at all about how I escaped you?"

Voldemort hesitated. He seemed to consider what Harry had said. "I know how you escaped me when you were a baby," he said slowly. "I miscalculated and forgot that your mother's sacrifice would protect you. This was old magic. You got lucky in our previous meetings; your continued existence is more due to my mistakes than to any talent on your part."

Harry snorted. "And tonight, Tom? What about tonight?"

Voldemort's nose flared at Harry's continued use of the name "Tom". It was clear that Voldemort was thrown by Harry's failure to die but he wasn't willing to admit ignorance. He watched the boy with narrowed eyes. Finally, slowly, he said, "You may be right, Potter. Perhaps I have underestimated you. You have managed to survive far longer than I would have thought possible. Instead of trying to kill you, I would have done better to invite you to join me. Tonight is the beginning of a new regime. You can be part of that new world order."

Tension filled the Hall. Harry knew that many of the people watching were worried that he would indeed turn out to be a Dark wizard after all. If he elected to join Voldemort, all was lost.

"You are right," said Harry, quietly. Voldemort started to smile in triumph. Harry continued, "Tonight is the beginning. It is the beginning of a new world without the threat of you in it."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes and clenched his jaw. "You stand for the Ministry? For Dumbledore? They didn't do anything to protect you. Why trust them?"

"I trust no one!" Harry said fiercely. "I can count on myself alone!"

Harry's voice rang through the Hall. It felt like a condemnation of everyone there.

Scrimgeour shifted uncomfortably. He felt a quick stab of guilt at Harry's words. But, he reminded himself, he had not been responsible for sending Harry to Azkaban. "No," said a little voice in his head. "But, the Ministry was. And, while you argued in favor of releasing him, it was touch and go for a while whether you would have agreed with Fudge and left him there. You know you would have done so if you thought that the truth would never have been revealed to the public."

Scrimgeour looked over at Dumbledore. The older wizard looked very pale and ill.

Voldemort smiled slyly. In a soft, cajoling voice, he continued, "Then why reject me so quickly? I can offer you immortality! Power beyond your dreams!"

Harry laughed but there was no amusement in the sound. "Immortality! When I desire nothing more than the peace of death?! The hardest thing I've ever done was to return to this world just now, after you had 'killed' me. I wanted nothing more than to follow my parents into the world beyond. Immortality! You could offer me little I'd desire less!"

Dumbledore's breath caught in his throat. To know that the boy desired nothing more than death illustrated all too clearly how much Harry had suffered. Dumbledore's eyes clouded at the knowledge that he was to blame for much of Harry's misery.

Harry continued. "And power! What do I want of power? As soon as I kill you, I will be free of my duty to this world. I intend to leave it and never return! I hope never to hear the word 'magic' again!"

As scared as people were of attracting attention, there was a rustling and intake of many breaths at Harry's pronouncement. Even Voldemort was so surprised, he asked in genuine curiosity, "You would leave the wizarding world? To do what? Join the muggles? Why?"

"I grew up with muggles and expected little from them. My aunt and uncle...you've heard how wonderful they were! But, when I first learned about the wizarding world, I was so excited. I thought it would be a good and noble world. With magic, I thought that people could help each other and be kind. I thought...I'd find friends, and people who would care. I thought I'd find a home. But, it was all a lie. You didn't rise to power in a vacuum. You found fertile ground for your 'new world order' in the racism and prejudice that pervades this world.

"It was the wizards in this world who left me to be raised by my abusive relatives. It was the wizards in this world who turned on 'Mark Twist' because he was muggleborn...like my mother! It was the wizards in this world who sentenced an innocent boy to Azkaban

without a trial! I have no desire to stay here. I have no wish to live in this world any longer!"

Voldemort looked at Harry calculatingly. "So, why not leave now? Why interfere here? If you don't wish to be a part of the wizarding world, this is not your fight."

Harry shook his head. "I've seen what you are. I've seen the wizards and muggles you've tortured and killed. This isn't just a wizard fight. I know that you must be stopped, no matter what. And, even if this was just about the wizarding world, I'd still not stop until you were defeated."

Voldemort huffed in disgust. "A bloody little hero."

The word was like a fire under Harry. He narrowed his eyes and said through gritted teeth, "Yes! That's what I am! I am the hero!"

It was as if an electric shock had run through the crowd. Harry's words were like a promise. Many in the audience started to believe, for the first time since Harry had appeared, that Harry was going to win.

Seeking to distract Harry, Crouch, who had been standing behind Voldemort, turned without warning toward the nursery in the corner and raised the wand that had fallen from Voldemort's pocket. "Incendia Maligna!" he yelled. A blast of flame shot out of his wand.

This was no ordinary fire. Crouch had summoned Fiendfyre. The flames, a vivid burning orange, took on the shape of various dark creatures, dragons, lethicores, and snakes, as they roared with deadly purpose toward the children. But, Harry had trained under Voldemort for almost a year. He was intimately familiar with the Dark Arts and, with lightning fast reflexes, Harry raised his arms and brought his wand down with a powerful sweep.

The fire sucked inward as if it had met a mighty wind. It reached its point of origin and flared up with a fiery explosion, swallowing Crouch and a few Death Eaters standing next to him. It also caught Nagini,

as the snake had been slithering close to Crouch at the time. The flame vanished, leaving behind a small pile of ash.

It had happened so quickly, people barely had time to react to the danger to their children before the danger was past. Parents started to scramble out of their seats when Voldemort screamed, "Stay where you are!" and they froze again. Mothers started sobbing louder. The children, who had frozen upon seeing the flames heading their way, started to cry with fright and call for their parents.

"Silencio!" Voldemort waved his wand and silence descended. Children's mouths were still open, as they cried, but no sound issued.

Harry ignored the hysteria around him and stared fixedly at the spot where Crouch and the others had last stood. Finally, he raised his eyes to Voldemort and said coldly, "You've even done this to me. Turned me into a killer!"

Dumbledore started in his chair. He wanted desperately to tell Harry that killing in self-defense or defense of others didn't make Harry a killer.

"I will make you pay!" hissed Voldemort.

Harry laughed wildly. There was an edge of hysteria to the sound. "Make me pay! What else can you do to me? You've killed my parents! You imprisoned me in Azkaban! You made me wish I'd never been born!"

Suddenly, a scared, trembling voice yelled, "Drop your wand, Potter, or I'll kill her!" Harry whipped around and saw Draco pointing the other wand Voldemort had dropped at Hermione. Hermione looked terrified and Draco looked equally so.

"Good boy, Draco!" purred Voldemort. "So, Harry, what's it to be? Are you going to let Draco kill your little friend? Even you cannot move fast enough to stop him. Drop your wand!"

Harry didn't move. He stared intently at Draco. Draco shook like a leaf. Quietly, Harry spoke directly to the other boy. "Now's the time for you to make a choice, Draco. This is the fork in the road. You must choose whether you will be a Death Eater or come back from that darkness."

Draco looked haunted. "I...I already..."

"No." Harry shook his head. "It doesn't matter what you chose to do before. I know you have the Dark Mark. But, that will be forgiven if you turn back now. You don't really want to help him, Draco. I've seen what he's done to you...and what he's made you do."

Draco turned pale and hesitated. "He'll kill my family," he whispered. It was clear he wanted to believe Harry.

Harry smiled serenely. "No, he won't. I will kill him tonight."

Voldemort let out a roar of rage. Draco flicked his eyes fearfully to his father's and then to Voldemort's. Lucius was off in a corner, drawn in upon himself. He didn't say anything and it was hard to guess what he wanted Draco to do. But, Harry noted, the Death Eater wasn't encouraging his son to take Voldemort's side. Harry thought briefly that Voldemort's cruelty, even to his own followers, had turned them against him. Lucius was no longer the ardent supporter of Voldemort that he had been when the Dark Lord had first been reborn.

As if compelled by the force of Harry's confidence, Draco looked back at the other boy. "Are you sure?" he begged for assurance.

Harry spoke loudly and without any hesitation, his voice ringing with conviction. "You can bet on it."

Draco lowered his wand and took a step backward. Voldemort let out another scream of fury.

"Crucio!" he screamed, casting the spell toward Draco. Anticipating the curse, Harry erected a barrier between Draco and Voldemort and

the curse bounced harmlessly away. Voldemort was furious but his attention was, once more, focused on Harry.

“You filthy little mudblood!” he shrieked. “You think that you can stop me?!” With a slashing movement of his wand, he shouted, “Stupefy!”

Harry shouted, “Echo Magnus!” Voldemort’s spell bounced off the shield Harry had conjured and rebounded upon Voldemort, knocking the Dark Lord off his feet.

Harry walked over to Voldemort who was lying on his back and the teen crouched down on the balls of his feet. Looking down at his nemesis, Harry asked softly, “Are you taking me seriously yet?”

Then, he got up and walked a few steps away. Voldemort regained his feet. The Dark Lord was flushed with anger and a hint of fear. “How did you know that spell?” he whispered. “That’s a new spell that I just invented. How did you learn it?”

“Why you taught it to me,” said Harry, facing Voldemort.

“What do you mean?” Voldemort demanded.

“You created your own worst enemy, Tom,” continued Harry. “If you hadn’t tried to kill me when I was a baby, you wouldn’t have left a piece of your soul in me. For the last year, I’ve been living inside your head. I have learned your secrets. You have been an excellent teacher.”

Voldemort’s voice became hoarser with fear. “You can see inside my head?”

Harry faced him calmly. “Rest easy, Tom. When you cast the Killing Curse at me earlier, you killed that piece of your soul residing in me.” Voldemort looked fearful and Harry smiled wryly. “Yes, a mixed blessing, wasn’t it? You certainly didn’t want me continuing to see inside your mind but the cure was perhaps worse than the disease. After all, losing a part of your soul, Tom...that is dangerous.”

Slowly, Harry reached inside his robe and withdrew an object. He let it fall on the floor with a clank. Helga Hufflepuff's cup. Harry reached inside again and this time let Slytherin's locket fall to the floor. Voldemort staggered, as if suddenly lightheaded. Dumbledore half-rose from his seat, his eyes blazing. Harry reached inside his robe yet again and took out Slytherin's ring, which fell to the floor with a little tinkle of sound. Harry reached inside one last time and took out Ravenclaw's diadem. This, too, he let fall from his fingers to join its brothers on the floor. The objects were all black and clearly damaged.

Voldemort's mouth was half open and he was breathing in short gasps. Voldemort raised unseeing eyes to Harry's and the teen answered the unspoken question. "I have destroyed them all, Tom. You have no horcruxes left." A few of the wizards who knew what a horcrux was gasped, finally understanding the significance of the items on the floor.

"How? How?" Voldemort was stunned and couldn't frame his question clearly.

Harry pulled a basilisk tooth from his pocket. "I knew that basilisk venom was able to destroy a horcrux, Tom. After all, I used it to destroy your diary when I was only twelve. I told you that I knew your secrets. I knew that, when you entered Hogwarts tonight, you planned on hiding your remaining horcruxes in the Secret Room before joining your Death Eaters in the Great Hall. Before I came here, I went first to the Chamber of Secrets, where I found some basilisk fangs, still there from years ago. I took some fangs with me to the Secret Room which I knew how to enter from having read your thoughts. I used the basilisk venom to destroy the horcruxes you had hidden there. Only Nagini was left and, as you can see, she's dead too." Harry gestured toward the pile of ash on the floor.

"I've already told you that you unwittingly split your soul again, when you tried to kill me as a baby. You killed that part of your soul yourself, when you cast the Avada Kedavra tonight. So, now you have no more horcruxes, Tom. There is nothing to keep you anchored to this world once you are killed. You will be well and truly dead."

Voldemort was shaken but he tried to hide it. "No matter. I will create more horcruxes tonight. I will use your death to create the first."

Harry stared back calmly. Voldemort raised his wand but was clearly unsure whether to chance casting the Killing Curse again. He lowered the wand slightly and tried once more to convince the boy to join him. "If you've lived inside my head this past year, then you must realize that there is much that I can teach you. Don't be a fool! You owe these people nothing! Join me and I will continue to teach you everything I know."

The boy looked at Voldemort with sadness. "You've been my refuge this last year," he admitted. "What a frigging irony! You wanted me dead and cast me to the Dementors. Yet you were the reason that I didn't die from them."

Voldemort seized on Harry's explanation. "Harry! Perhaps this was meant to be! I was your savior, wasn't I? A mentor. A father of sorts. Let me continue to be your guide."

Harry's eyes blazed. "You're not my father. You killed my father! You are evil and I will not stop until you are defeated!"

Voldemort lost some of his control. He threw an entrails expelling curse at Harry, which the boy deflected by summoning an iron shield from one of the suits of armor standing in the corner of the room. When Voldemort's spell hit the shield, it gave off a low gong sound. Taking advantage of the fact Voldemort had lowered his own magical shield in order to cast the spell, and Harry quickly muttered a Switching Spell of his own.

Voldemort realized immediately that something had changed. He looked down at the wand in his hand and realized that he was no longer holding the Elder Wand, but an unknown wand. "What?! Where's my wand? What have you done?" He glared at Harry.

"Magic," Harry taunted. "You're right, Tom, it really is a nice wand." He twirled the Elder Wand in his hand, driving Voldemort ever more wild with fury.

Voldemort gave a sudden twist of his body, trying to apparate away. Harry shook his head. "That won't work, Tom. I've restored the anti-apparition wards you took down. Tonight is the night that this ends. There's no running away. This is it."

"I will kill you! You cannot win!" screamed Voldemort.

"You are wrong. I cannot lose," said Harry evenly, confidence radiating from him.

Driven by his rage, Voldemort shouted once again, "Avada Kedavra!" Harry quickly flew out of the way of the spell, flying without a broom as Voldemort had taught him. As Harry dodged out of the way, Voldemort's curse hit the barrier behind Harry, the barrier formed by the Echo Magnus spell that Harry had cast earlier – the spell Voldemort himself had taught Harry. As Harry had hoped, Voldemort had completely forgotten it was still there.

When the spell hit the force field, it ricocheted back to Voldemort, hitting him solidly in the chest. It killed him instantly and his body fell backwards with a loud thump. His arms and legs splayed wide and his eyes gazed sightlessly up at the ceiling. He was dead.

At first there was utter silence. Then, a rumbling began and built up slowly until it was a deafening roar. Screams and shouts filled the room. "He's dead! You Know Who's dead! Potter killed You Know Who!"

Harry stared at Voldemort's body in slight shock. He had known without a doubt that he would kill Voldemort that night but the reality was still hard to absorb. He was aware that hundreds of eyes were staring at him, looking back and forth from him to Voldemort's dead body, unable to believe their eyes and the sudden change in fortune. One moment, Voldemort was poised to take over the wizarding world. The next, he was dead.

Dumbledore and Scrimgeour were hurrying around the head table, approaching Voldemort's body to confirm that he was really dead. Throughout the Hall, people were rising from the tables. The parents

whose children were in the nursery section were rushing to retrieve their children, hugging them tightly. Death Eaters started fleeing the Great Hall, but a number of the Aurors ran after them, and started rounding them up.

Pandemonium reigned. A few people approached Harry and tentatively reached out to touch him, but, not sure of their welcome, pulled back before they made contact.

Harry felt lightheaded. He had been so focused upon defeating Voldemort, he didn't quite know how to handle the reality that he had succeeded. It was over.

Suddenly, the Weasleys and Hermione were there. "Harry...Mark...Harry..." began Ron. He stopped, unsure how to even begin.

"Harry," the other boy confirmed.

"Harry," Ron continued. "We're so sorry..."

Harry shook his head to stop his friend from saying any more.

"You tried your best to free me," said Harry. "You don't have to say anything. I understand."

Ginny stepped forward a pace. She, too, had so much she wanted to say and could only manage, "Please, don't..."

Harry's eyes were full of pain as he said, "I can't stay here. I can't."

"I...We're your friends." The Weasleys and Hermione nodded their heads vigorously, in agreement.

"It's not enough," he said bluntly. They looked stricken. Ginny, in particular, looked like she'd been slapped. Harry tried to explain better. "It's not about you...any of you. I'm just filled with such pain and...rage. I need to get away from here."

And then, there was Dumbledore, with Scrimgeour right behind the headmaster's left shoulder. The Hall started to quiet as people strove to listen.

"Harry," said Dumbledore in a low voice, regret tingeing every word. "I'm sorry for everything that's happened to you. Please let us make it up to you."

Harry's eyes blazed as he released the bitterness of the last months. "I have no interest in listening to anything you or the rest of the wizarding world have to say. Actions speak louder than words. My relatives hated me because I was a wizard and plenty in the wizarding world hated me because they thought I was muggleborn. Everywhere I turn, I am caught in the crossfire of hatred and intolerance."

Dumbledore tried to reach through Harry's fury. "Harry, you have every right to be angry. Voldemort tapped into all that was twisted and wrong in our world. He exposed the worst in us but there is good too."

Harry shook his head in rejection of Dumbledore's words. "I did what I had to do – I killed Voldemort -- but I am not willing to forgive or forget." He gave a huff of disgust, recalling his innocent self. "I used to dream that I'd save everyone from Voldemort and people would cheer me as a hero."

Dumbledore nodded emphatically, "You will be honored as a hero, Harry."

Harry just shook his head. His green eyes blazed. "I was a child when I had those dreams. I'm not a child anymore." He looked over at the still body of Voldemort lying on the ground. "Go on. Celebrate. He's dead and I am now free to start over. I need to find somewhere I can belong."

Realizing what he intended, a number of voices throughout the Hall called out "No!"

“You belong here! Let us prove it. Don’t turn away from us,” implored Dumbledore.

Harry removed the anti-apparition wards protecting Hogwarts. Then, he handed Dumbledore the Elder Wand. “This is yours. I don’t need it anymore.”

Dumbledore took the wand. He looked down at the gleaming wood and then back at the boy. It was clear he was considering trying to prevent Harry from leaving.

The boy smiled sadly. “I’m already gone,” he said. And without another word, he disappeared.

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Chapter Twenty-Four – Sixth Year; Harry Potter Lost Again

In the months following Voldemort's defeat at the hands of Harry Potter, the wizarding world buried and mourned its dead. Voldemort's rise to power had taken a terrible toll. Almost everyone had lost a friend or family member.

The anger against followers of Voldemort intensified as the fear dissipated. The Ministry had to put extra guards at Azkaban to prevent vigilantes from trying to kill Peter Pettigrew, Bellatrix Lestrange and other captured Death Eaters. Suspected Death Eaters were treated harshly and sentenced to long prison terms. Only Dumbledore's vouching for him kept Snape from Azkaban.

Although the Malfoys were known Death Eaters, they escaped prison and confiscation of their property because of Draco's last minute rejection of the Dark Lord. Many families still viewed the Malfoys with suspicion and dislike but it was the general consensus that they had landed on their feet, once again.

Underlying all of the activity in rebuilding their world was the constant refrain of "Where was Harry Potter?" In the past, when they had been looking for Harry, it was with the intention of making sure that a child was being treated well. Only Dumbledore had been aware of the prophecy. Others had simply been grateful that the infant Harry had defeated the evil wizard and had wanted to make sure that he had a good life. When they had learned that his childhood had been miserable, people had wanted to make sure that his teenage years were safe and happy.

But, now, the desire to find Harry had taken on a different edge. There was a burning need for forgiveness and the need to express the gratitude in their hearts. Knowing that Harry had been living among them for the last five years, and had been treated as poorly by the wizarding world as he had been treated by his muggle relatives, left a foul taste of guilt in most people's mouths.

Dumbledore had a more compelling reason for wanting to find Harry. He explained his concern during a meeting in his office in which Scrimgeour, Snape, McGonagall, and Arthur Weasley were present.

Arthur had approached Scrimgeour at work, asking for information about Harry. Given his family's past personal friendship with "Mark Twist", he had argued that he had a particular interest in the situation. Scrimgeour had requested a meeting with Dumbledore, and invited Arthur to come with him. The headmaster had asked to include both Snape and McGonagall in the meeting as well.

"It's as if he disappeared into thin air," sighed Scrimgeour. "We know that he's good at hiding. He was able to avoid discovery for the last five years after all. We've searched all the places that Mark Twist had been, including where he lived of course, but he is clever enough not to return to his old haunts."

Professor McGonagall offered, tentatively, "Maybe we should leave him alone. After all, he seems able to take care of himself. He lived on his own each summer since he was eleven. While we don't want to admit it, maybe he's better off away from us."

Dumbledore looked grave. "Minerva, I'm afraid it's more serious than just whether or not we want to find Harry to tell him that we are sorry for the way he was treated, and to thank him for his tremendous service to us all in defeating Voldemort. The boy has gone through so much. Abuse as a child. Isolation as a teenager. Azkaban. Living inside Voldemort's mind. Such a history is likely to leave scars. It would be astonishing if it didn't. Harry will need help, medical help I believe, to deal with what he's gone through."

Snape had a look of disdain on his face. "Maybe you're just coddling the boy," he sneered. "He seemed sure of himself when he confronted the Dark Lord."

Arthur Weasley objected. "Fine? He said he wished he were dead!"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, that's exactly what I mean. Harry needs to come to terms with his anger and loss and go on from there. Running away from our world, and changing where he lives, is unlikely to bring him the peace he's seeking. And, what will happen when he can't find that peace? That's what has me very worried."

There was a momentary silence as everyone pondered this ominous picture.

Dumbledore continued, in a heavy voice. "I should have tried to prevent him from leaving the night he killed Voldemort. It's just that everything happened so quickly. I wasn't sure if I should interfere. However, the more I've thought about it since, the more I regret not having stopped Harry. I'm sure he needs our help."

"What can we do?" asked Arthur.

"We've already exhausted all possible leads," said Scrimgeour, in frustration.

"If only he performed some magic," bemoaned McGonagall. "You'd be able to track him through the use of underage magic."

Scrimgeour nodded gloomily. "He seems to be holding to his promise to walk away from magic entirely."

Dumbledore said, "I think it's likely that he'll remain in England. He may want some change, but I think England is still home to him. He made his living during the summers as a busboy in a muggle restaurant. I think he may well try to get a similar job at another restaurant."

"Do you know how many muggle restaurants there are? I don't think muggles ever eat at home! There are too many to check," said Scrimgeour.

"And what if he's hiding his identity again?" asked McGonagall.

"I don't think he'll do that," said Dumbledore slowly. "I think that he'll be done with hiding who he is."

"What about sending an owl?" asked Arthur. "If he's not hiding his identity any longer, won't an owl be able to find him? Is there some way we can put a trace on it?"

“We have sent owls to him. I think that they may have found him, but he won’t take the letters they hold. Unless he touches the letter, any tracking device wouldn’t work, since any such device would have to be embedded in a letter – it’s impossible to put a trace on an owl itself,” explained Scrimgeour.

“I just don’t see how we’re going to be able to find him if he doesn’t wish to be found,” said McGonagall.

“I fear you are right,” agreed Scrimgeour. “I just hope that he’s willing to seek our help before it’s too late.”

“You’re just worried that the public will hold the Ministry to blame if something else were to happen to Harry Potter,” said Snape cynically.

Dumbledore frowned at Snape but Scrimgeour didn’t take offense. The Minister just nodded morosely. “Yes, I don’t think the wizarding world will forgive us if we fail that boy yet again.”

Arthur said bracingly, “Well, the only thing we can do is keep looking.”

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The first year students entered the History of Magic class expecting to be as bored as usual. It was hard to be interested when Professor Binns droned on and on about the Goblin Rebellions. Who cared about what had happened so long ago?

They perked up with interest when they noticed a different teacher standing at the front of the room. Who was this? Was Professor Binns absent? How could that be? A ghost didn’t get sick.

“Hello, class,” said the teacher, a tall, middle aged man, with dark hair and a kindly face. “I am Professor Peterson. I will be your History of Magic teacher for the rest of the term. Professor Binns has, unexpectedly, moved on to the other side.”

Excited murmurs burst out throughout the class. The teacher waited patiently until the class settled down again. After all, it wasn’t every

day that students learned that their teacher was dead. Professor Binns had been dead a long time. But, now, it seemed, he was really...well, dead.

The teacher continued. "I know that many people think that History of Magic is not the most exciting subject." He smiled at the rolling of the eyes and sniggers from the students. "I hope I can change your mind. History can be thrilling. Stories of scandal, betrayal, death, love, sacrifice..." The students were sitting up straighter in their chairs and leaning forward eagerly.

"I know we have to cover the curriculum, and we'll finish up with the Goblin rebellions in a few weeks. It seems to me that we should first cover one of the most important moments in wizarding history...a turning point that we have been a part of these last few years. Those of you who are muggleborn may not be familiar with our recent war, and even those born of wizard families may not fully understand the implications of the historic battle for the soul of our world that was just fought."

The teacher paused for effect. He was pleased that he had captured the attention of the students. They were hanging on his every word. "Voldemort!" he said. A number of the students jumped or sucked in their breath. "That is the name of the wizard who tried to take over the wizarding world. His very name was feared and he is generally referred to as You Know Who or He Who Must Not Be Named. Called the Dark Lord by his followers, the Death Eaters. He believed that magic should be kept within all-wizard families and was against educating muggleborns."

At this, a number of muggleborns frowned fiercely and their eyes glowed with anger. The teacher nodded, "Yes. He was in favor of killing all muggleborns and having wizards rule over the muggle world. You Know Who came close to accomplishing his goal. He was on the brink of taking over when he was stopped just six months ago. Stopped by one boy who was not even 16 years old."

"Harry Potter!" breathed a number of the students.

“Harry Potter,” the teacher nodded. “Harry Potter’s story is one of the most unbelievable stories you’ll ever hear. But, what makes it more thrilling than any legend you’ll ever read is that this story is completely true. And it started before Harry was born, with a prophecy...”

When the bell rang, the students reluctantly rose from their seats. The teacher had only just begun to tell them about Harry’s childhood. While the students born of wizarding families were generally familiar with the story of Harry Potter, there was a lot they did not know. So much of Harry’s past had occurred when they were children themselves and their parents had been careful how much to share with them. For the muggleborns, the story was almost entirely unknown and vastly exciting. Sure, they had heard small pieces of the tale when they overheard older students discussing the recent war, but no one had put it all together for them.

Over the next few days, History of Magic was a favorite class as the students eagerly listened as the story of Harry Potter and his epic battle with Voldemort unfolded. They were entranced by Lily’s sacrifice, shocked at how badly Harry had been abused by his relatives, appalled at his treatment by the wizarding world when he had cleverly hidden his identity, and distraught at how he had been framed and thrown into Azkaban. Finally, they felt the glow of satisfaction and pride at Harry’s ultimate defeat of the Dark Lord.

“...and he disappeared from the Great Hall, never to be seen again,” finished the teacher.

The class was quiet as they absorbed the ending of the story.

“So, Harry is out there somewhere?” asked one of the students.

The teacher nodded. “Yes. The Ministry has been looking for him, of course. But, no one has been able to find him. He did what he promised to do. He killed You Know Who. After that, he was free to leave and that’s what he did.”

“But that’s terrible!” said one of the girls in the class. “He doesn’t belong with muggles. He’s a wizard!”

One of the muggleborn students took offense at her tone. Without raising his hand, he said, “It’s not like he was treated well by wizards. I can understand why he wanted to leave.”

A number of the other students nodded. The teacher tried to diffuse any battles. “I think we can all understand why Harry wanted to leave. But, we also wish that he would have stayed. Stayed so that we could have shown him that there are people here that care about him. That he has a home here. That he is loved by many.

“If ever Harry were to return, we hope to show him that the wizarding world is capable of tolerance and understanding. As I said a few days ago, the battle between the Dark Lord and Harry Potter was a battle for the very soul of our world. When Harry defeated You Know Who, he condemned us for our prejudice against muggles and muggleborns. He was right – that prejudice and discrimination were like a cancer in our society. It led to You Know Who’s rise to power and it was a large part of the reason ‘Mark Twist’ found himself in Azkaban.

“Since Harry left, the Wizengamot has strengthened the Muggle Protection Act. The new laws are known as the Lily Potter Amendments, in honor of Harry’s muggleborn mother. Among other actions, the Ministry created a new Muggle Liaison Office. It also is sponsoring seminars and conferences to educate wizards about muggles, to teach about some of the common misperceptions and areas where there are cultural differences. The hope is that, with greater understanding, comes greater acceptance.

“Hogwarts is trying to do its part too. You all know that Muggle Studies is a required course for non-muggleborns.” The students nodded. “What you may not realize is that this policy was instituted for the first time this year.

“These aren’t the only changes. After Voldemort was defeated, Dementors sought to return to their role guarding Azkaban. By

unanimous vote, the Winzengamot refused to permit this. The Wizengamot also appointed a representative from the legal aid society to provide greater oversight on the treatment of anyone accused of a crime. The Ministry will no longer be able to circumvent the court and send prisoners to Azkaban without trial.”

The class was silent for a moment, taking in these sweeping reforms. “Professor,” said one of the boys after a moment. “You’ve shown us the Daily Prophet articles that had pictures of Mark Twist. But, what does Harry Potter look like?”

“Unfortunately, there are no pictures of Harry,” said the teacher. “The only time that he showed his real identity was in the final battle, and no one was snapping pictures then, of course. However, everyone who saw him then say that he’s the image of his father, James Potter, but with his mother’s green eyes. I think I have a picture of James somewhere around here.”

The teacher shuffled through some textbooks and papers on his desk. After a while, he was able to pull out a book written after the rise and fall of Voldemort during his first reign. The book had a chapter devoted to how the baby Harry had defeated the Dark Lord. In that chapter, there was a picture of Lily and James holding a newborn. The couple smiled happily at the camera. The teacher passed the book around the classroom so that each student could look at the picture.

A few of the girls started crying when they saw the happy couple, knowing that the Potters were destined to be killed shortly after that picture was taken. The book made its rounds through the classroom, ultimately passing to a muggleborn boy named Gavin Calt. Gavin took a look at the picture and frowned. He studied the picture intently and then looked up at the teacher. He opened his mouth to say something, then closed it and looked at the picture again even more closely. Finally, slowly, he said, “Professor...”

Something in the boy’s tone made the teacher look at him in concern. “Yes?”

“Professor. I think I’ve seen this man...I mean, I guess James Potter is dead, so I didn’t see him. If Harry looks like him, that means I must have seen Harry. Harry Potter. I think I’ve seen him.”

The class gasped and Gavin was peppered with questions. “Class!” called the teacher, sharply. They subsided and the teacher walked over to Gavin’s desk. He jabbed a finger at the picture in the book lying on the table. “Are you saying that you’ve seen a boy who looks like this man?” Gavin nodded. “Where? When?”

“This summer, sir. Near where I live.”

“Come with me, Mr. Calt. We’re going to see the headmaster. Class dismissed.”

The teacher ushered the boy out of the room, leaving behind a class chattering excitedly behind them.

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Harry was tired. It was hard to remember a time when he hadn’t felt tired. Carrying a plastic tray, he traveled slowly from table to table, clearing away dirty dishes left by diners who had already eaten. He didn’t have the strength to carry a heavy load, so he made multiple trips back into the kitchen, unloading the tray into the sink where he would wash them later on.

He had been working at the diner for the last number of months. He knew that he was lucky that he had been hired before he started to look so sickly. He was sure that no one would be willing to hire him now. Sometimes, he caught the boss looking at him with concern and he worried that he would be fired. After all, people didn’t like working with anyone who looked ill. Cynically, Harry thought, people always turned on anyone who was different. He had certainly learned that lesson often enough during his childhood.

If he lost this job, he didn’t know what he’d do. It brought in enough money to keep him off the streets at least. He was able to afford a

small room to himself at a cheap men's hotel. If he couldn't pay for the room, he'd be out on the street.

He knew that it was his own fault that he was losing weight and energy. It was just that he couldn't sleep or eat. He dreaded seeing the accusing faces of the people he had been unable to save during Voldemort's reign of terror. Many nights, Harry refused to sleep at all. On those nights when he could no longer avoid falling asleep, he would fall into an exhausted stupor. The instant he closed his eyes, memories flooded to the surface. He relived the horrors of the months he had lived inside Voldemort's mind, remembering the terror of the victims and pleas for mercy. Even when he awoke, their screams lingered in his ears.

Suffering from exhaustion, he found eating a chore. It was a constant battle to force himself to eat at all. When he did manage to choke down some food, his stomach churned uncomfortably and he often found it difficult to keep it down.

He had dark circles under his eyes and his skin held a sickly pallor. He was too thin and his green eyes were dull.

Many times throughout the day he would wish that he had been able to follow his parents into the light. It was so hard to get through each hour. He felt as if the world around him was tinged with gray and he wondered where all the color had gone. There were periods when it was hard to draw breath and he felt a weight pressing on his heart. At such times, he would stand still and listen to his body, wondering whether it had decided it was time for him to join his parents after all. But, after a few minutes, to his disappointment, the weight would lift and his breathing would ease.

He had hoped to start anew in the muggle world but he couldn't leave his past behind him. It was haunting him. Harry had thought that killing Voldemort would enable him to start a new life. But, he wasn't free. He had realized for some time now that he would never be free. Voldemort had found a way to torture him from beyond the grave, Harry thought bitterly. He may have killed the Dark Lord, but Voldemort was having his revenge by killing Harry too. Slowly and painfully.

Harry noticed without interest that the diner was busier than usual. There seemed to be quite a number of tables filled with either one or two people. It was sort of odd that there weren't more children, since the diner was cheap enough to attract families. He wondered, fleetingly, whether there had been some event that had just ended because a number of the diners seemed to arrive within minutes of each other and most hadn't ordered very much. Most seemed to have requested just a coffee or tea. He was often aware of such details because he knew that he'd have to clear the tables after the diners had left. He knew that the boss would be disappointed that the diners were not big spenders but he was relieved that he wouldn't have as much to clear.

He was just clearing a table in the middle of the room when he realized that one of the men had gotten up and stood in front of the door. It was strange how he seemed to be blocking the exit. Harry stopped what he was doing and turned to watch him, puzzled. He heard the click of the door locking although he hadn't seen anyone touch the door. The noise level in the diner dipped noticeably as a number of the diners stood up simultaneously.

Harry froze. Something was going on. Was it a robbery? Without speaking to each other, a few of the people who stood approached those few tables where the diners had remained seated. The people who had been eating and chatting looked up, as puzzled as Harry felt. The people who were standing took wands out of their sleeves and pointed them at the other diners and said, "Stupefy!" The diners slumped in their seats.

Harry felt his tray slip from his hand and land onto the table with a clatter. He stumbled backward, his breath catching. They had found him! He looked around the room and realized that he was surrounded. There were easily twenty men and women positioned around the diner, each holding out a wand.

"Harry, please don't be alarmed." Harry whirled to face the voice. It was Arthur Weasley. He had obviously been under a glamour charm when he had entered the diner.

“Leave me alone!” shouted Harry. He had meant to sound forceful and was annoyed that his voice sounded frightened, even to his own ears.

“We’re not here to harm you, Harry. We want to help you.” Arthur approached the boy slowly, arms outspread to show that he was not dangerous.

Harry didn’t listen. He had no intention of staying here. Luckily, he didn’t need a wand to apparate. He twisted and imagined himself back at his room, but he was unable to apparate out of the diner.

Becoming more frightened, Harry backed up a few more steps, but he couldn’t go further as he was all too aware that there wizards behind him. “Let me go!”

His attempt to apparate out of the diner had not gone unnoticed. “Harry, please calm down. We’re not here to hurt you. As you’ve just learned, we’ve put up anti-apparition wards around the diner. The time for running away is over. We’ve come to bring you back where you belong. We’re here to help you.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed in anger. “I don’t need help. I want to be left alone. Go away!”

Keeping his voice calm, Arthur continued. “We think you do need help, Harry. It’s clear you’re ill. You need to see a healer.”

Another voice joined the conversation. “You’re underage. You have no choice. You have to do as we tell you.” It was another wizard whom Harry didn’t recognize.

Arthur shook his head at the other wizard, knowing that this was the wrong approach. And, indeed, the wizard’s comment inflamed the teen. “Oh, yeah?! And what are you going to do if I don’t? Put me in Azkaban? Oops. Forgot. You already did that!” Harry glared at the wizard. “You have some nerve! I’m not going with you!”

Without warning, the boy held out his hand and shouted, “Accio wands!” However, the wizards had been prepared for this move, as a number of them had been present during Harry’s battle with Voldemort. They had each been careful to cast protective shields around themselves.

Harry lowered his hand. He turned paler and stared accusingly at Arthur. “Leave me alone!” It was closer to a plea than a demand now.

Slowly, Arthur shook his head. “I’m sorry, Harry. We can’t do that. We care about you. You are very important to us. We are here to help you.”

Bitterly, Harry said, “Unless you are here to kill me, you can’t help me. No one can help me.”

A shocked silence met this outburst. Arthur breathed heavily. His voice shook as he said, “You are wrong, Harry. We can help. Please let us.”

Harry shook his head. “Go away!”

Arthur’s voice steadied and he said calmly, but firmly. “We’ll be taking you to St. Mungo’s. Dedalus,” he indicated another wizard, “and I will apparate with you to a room there. The wards are being lowered so that we can transport you directly. There will be healers there waiting. Everyone is so happy we’ve found you and eager to help. Please, Harry.”

Harry looked around the diner. He was trapped. He was in the clutches of the wizarding world again. Arthur might be telling him that they wanted to help but how could he trust them? How could he ever trust anyone? His skin felt clammy and his breath came in short gasps. His blood ran cold and there was a hard knot in his stomach. He knew the signs of the panic attack all too well. It’s how he felt almost every night waking up from one of his haunted dreams. Damn! The last few months had left him too weak to fight.

As if from far away, he heard Arthur say urgently, “Are you okay, Harry?” In a moment, Arthur had reached his side and gripped his

shoulder tightly. Harry tried to pull away, but he couldn't escape. He felt another hand grasp his left arm. The two wizards flanked him as Harry heard someone mutter the incantation in the background lowering the anti-apparition wards.

Behind him, he heard a wizard saying to someone else in the background, "Don't forget to obliviate the muggles before leaving."

"I won't," said another unfamiliar voice.

"And don't forget to find the owner of this establishment. He's to believe that his worker decided to find another job. He shouldn't be alarmed that Harry doesn't show up at work again."

Another voice answered. "Don't worry. I'll take care of that."

The voice giving directions continued, "Arthur, Dedalus, do you have him securely?"

"Yes," they said in unison.

"The wards are lowered. Take him now."

"No," Harry protested. But, even as he said it, he felt the men holding him twist and he was forced along, feeling the pull of apparition squeezing at him.

In seconds, he had left the diner behind and staggered when they arrived in a brightly lit room at St. Mungos. A number of wizards who had clearly been waiting for them rushed to approach the trio. Dimly, Harry heard someone mutter some protective spells as anti-apparition charms were re-established in the room, sealing him inside the hospital. Arthur and Dedalus stepped away from him and Harry swayed unsteadily. Immediately, Harry was surrounded by healers and nurses.

He gave an alarmed cry as various hands pulled at him, pushing him until he lay down on a bed in the room. He was vaguely aware that people kept telling him not to worry but their voices mingled into one

riot of sound. He tried to get up off the bed but hands kept pushing him down. When some straps snaked around the bed and held his legs and arms down, he cried out louder.

Someone held a potion to his mouth but Harry twisted his head, refusing to drink. A bit spilled before someone firmly held his head in place by grabbing the hair at the back of head firmly. While he couldn't turn his head any longer, Harry clenched his teeth, refusing to swallow. He ignored the voices telling him that it was just a calming drink and that he had nothing to fear. Nothing to fear! When he was surrounded by people who were imprisoning him!

A firm hand put pressure on his jaw, forcing his mouth open. The potion was poured in his mouth. He tried to spit it out but the healer was obviously experienced and used to dealing with difficult patients. His mouth was forced shut and his throat stroked until he had no choice but to swallow. He continued to struggle weakly until the potion took effect. His struggles slowed and, finally, the boy was quiet as, exhausted, he slipped into an oblivion that was closer to unconsciousness than sleep.

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Chapter Twenty Five – Year Six; Harry Potter Found Again

The wizarding world was buzzing with the news that Harry Potter had been found. Daily Prophet reporters were hounding any Ministry official they could find for news about the teen hero. Was it true that he had been found living on the streets? Was it true that he was on the verge of death? What was the Ministry going to do with the boy? Was he going to return to Hogwarts? Was it true that people were offering to pay for the privilege of fostering the boy until he was of age?

When Rita Skeeter suggested in her column that Harry Potter might be at St. Mungo's, the hospital found itself flooded with wizards who insisted that they be allowed to see the boy and thank him personally for defeating You Know Who. They seemed to believe that, if they just explained to Harry that they were truly grateful, Harry would be happy to return to the wizarding world. Buried under the onslaught of wizards who were camping out in waiting rooms, the hospital administration begged the Ministry for extra security to help control the crowds.

There were so many flowers and balloons sent by well-wishers, the hospital had to hire extra help to cart them away to share with other patients. Even within the hospital, there was trouble maintaining control. Hospital staff from other wards were caught trying to sneak into Harry's room for a glimpse of the famous wizard.

Dumbledore, on the other hand, forced himself to stay away from the hospital. While he desperately wanted to visit Harry himself, he knew he would not be welcome. And, as much as he greatly wished to express his regrets to Harry once again, he was wise enough to know that Harry was not ready to be receptive to his apologies. His presence would only hinder the medical evaluation, so he forced himself to be content with the knowledge that at least Harry was in the hands of the best Healers in the wizarding world.

Scrimgeour made the mistake of visiting Harry the day after the boy arrived at St. Mungo's. The Minister had wanted to be the first to welcome the little hero back but was unprepared for the hostile reception he received.

“Harry?” The boy had been napping, but, at the sound of his name, he opened his eyes and blinked blearily at the face hovering above him. Reaching over, Harry grabbed for his glasses, which were sitting on the table next to his bed and put them on. It was the Minister. Harry recognized him from some of Voldemort’s memories. Harry also remembered that he had been present at the final battle, sitting next to Dumbledore at the staff table.

Harry hastily sat up in the bed. The Minister was wearing an overly hearty smile and was holding out his hand to shake Harry’s. Harry glared at the man, and the Minister let his hand drop to his side. “Harry!” He began what was obviously a prepared speech. “Let me be the first to welcome you back to the wizarding world. I want to thank you both personally and as Minister for defeating You Know Who. We can hardly convey the depths of our gratitude...”

Harry cut him off. “You can start by letting me go,” he said through gritted teeth.

The interruption threw Scrimgeour for a brief moment. Then he continued as if Harry had not spoken. “You will be awarded a special citation and the Wizengamot has declared that the day you defeated You Know Who will be henceforth known as Harry Potter Day!”

Harry snorted. “You’ve got to be kidding!”

Scrimgeour pressed on. “We look forward to your taking your rightful place in our world...”

“I want to leave!” insisted Harry.

The Minister hesitated and then said, “All in good time, Harry. All in good time. We just want to make sure that you are well.”

“Hypocrite!” Harry accused, angrily. “Where was the wizarding world when I was being abused by my aunt and uncle? Where were they when I was thrown into Azkaban? You didn’t care if I was well, then!”

“We’re sorry, Harry! We are anxious to make amends. These were terrible mistakes! By my predecessor,” Scrimgeour hastened to add.

“You can stuff your apologies!” said the boy, rudely. “I just want to be left alone!”

The door opened and a few healers entered. Harry grimaced. They were back to poke at him again. Scrimgeour greeted the healers with relief. “I better be going, Harry,” he said, backing away from the angry teen. “The healers will need to examine you and...” he trailed off, not sure what else to say. Reaching the door, he gave another hearty smile and called cheerily, as if he and Harry had just exchanged a pleasant talk, “Talk to you soon, Harry. Get well, now!” He ducked out of the door.

Harry glared at the retreating Minister. Damn! It was obvious the Minister wasn’t prepared to let him go. It was too bad he was underage. It wouldn’t surprise him if the Wizengamot insisted he return to Hogwarts. Well, if they did, he’d just have to escape again. There wasn’t any way they could force him to stay, right? And, worst come to worst, he’d be out of there as soon as he turned seventeen. If he had to return to Hogwarts, he would see Ron, Hermione, Ginny, Fred, George and others. Well, maybe that would be okay but he’d also have to see a whole bunch of other people he would prefer never to see again. There would be the other students who were quick to turn on “Mark Twist.” There would also be Dumbledore, who he had no doubt, was behind Harry’s forceable return to the wizarding world.

That old man! He was as ruthless as Voldemort! Okay, so maybe Dumbledore’s goals were not evil but did the ends justify the means? And, for Merlin’s sake, who died and appointed him king? Dumbledore seemed to think that he, and he alone, knew what was best for everyone. Well, he was wrong! He didn’t know what was best for Harry and neither did the healers!

The next few days were difficult for Harry. Every time he turned around, someone was poking and prodding at him, asking him questions and waving wands over his body in some weird diagnostic

doctorly way. He had a headache from the need to constantly push away the mental probes that sought to peer inside his head. What was wrong with these people? Why couldn't they leave him alone?!

Okay, he had lost weight. So what he had nightmares? It was his business. The way they all hummed around him, muttering in concern about his health was infuriating. Didn't they understand that he wanted to die? What was so wrong about that? People died everyday. He certainly had witnessed death time and time again, while "living" inside Voldemort. He just wanted some peace. He wanted this horrible feeling that clenched his stomach and clouded his mind to go away. He wanted the screams that haunted his dreams to stop. Everyone should leave him alone. They couldn't help him. They couldn't make him feel clean again. They couldn't turn back time so that he could live his life all over.

A few days after Harry had arrived at St. Mungo's, at the request of the hospital Board, the Wizengamot convened an emergency meeting to discuss the "Potter situation." At Dumbledore's request, Arthur and Molly Weasley were permitted to attend, but they were asked to keep quiet during the proceedings.

A team of five Healers entered the chamber. The senior Healer, Lucretia Moulson, was the spokesperson for the group. After greetings had been exchanged, she began, "I thank you all for agreeing to see us so quickly."

Scrimgeour responded. "You said you had important information about Harry Potter. You know we are all eager to hear about the boy's condition."

The Healers all looked grim. "The reason we asked to speak with you is that the boy's condition is grave indeed."

Everyone leaned forward in their seats to listen closely. "The boy is ill. He's malnourished and suffering from exhaustion. More critically, he's suffering from depression and anxiety."

"This was not unexpected. Dumbledore," the Minister gestured to the headmaster sitting to his right, "was worried about this months

ago and that was one of the reasons we spent so much time trying to find the boy.”

“As it turns out, these fears were well-justified. It’s clear that Harry’s on the edge of a breakdown. He’s an obvious danger to himself.”

Scrimgeour asked, hesitantly, “Healer Moulson, what are you saying?”

“I’m saying that it’s only a matter of time before the boy succeeds in killing himself,” said the Healer, ominously.

The witches and wizards in the Court were aghast. Molly Weasley started to cry. Arthur patted her arm awkwardly.

Scrimgeour burst out, “Well, can’t you fix him?”

The Healer explained. “We are trying our best. But, unless we can treat the underlying cause of Harry’s pain, there is little we can do. Treating the symptoms is a temporary measure at best. Cheering Charms last only about an hour. And, we can’t keep giving him Cheering potions. Not only are they highly addictive, they lose their efficacy after a few weeks.”

Dumbledore spoke up. His tone was calm but anyone looking at him could see the deep concern in his eyes. “Can you treat the underlying cause?”

“Yes, in theory. We know that Harry has witnessed or suffered himself a series of traumatic events.” A pall settled over the room as everyone recalled all too clearly what those events were. “If we can loosen the hold those events have over his memories, we believe he can improve. As it stands, they are taking control of his life.”

“How can you treat this?” asked the Minister.

“That’s the problem, sir. At the moment, we simply cannot treat it. When Harry’s awake, he refuses to allow us access to his mind. His occlumency skills are superior. This is not surprising considering how

he spent most of his teenage years pretending to be someone else. He's honed his skills in keeping his real self hidden behind an impenetrable wall. Unfortunately, as you all are no doubt are aware, legilimency doesn't work very well when someone's asleep or drugged."

One of the other members of the Wizengamot signaled to be recognized and, at Scrimgeour's nod, asked, "Why not obliviate him, Healer Moulson?"

"Obliviation only works if there's a defined memory or memories that we're trying to erase. Here, we are talking about months, maybe years, of memories that are part of Harry's life. Obliviation is not an option."

The wizard pressed, "Are you saying that, if you could read Harry's mind, you'd be able to loosen these memories?"

"That would be the hope, sir," confirmed the Healer.

"How?"

"I'm sorry to say it's a painful process. We would need to enter his thoughts and pinpoint the traumatic memories. They are typically very easy to identify, as they tend to be dark in color. These have to be carefully pried away from the healthy thoughts. It's like separating a vein of poison from otherwise clear water."

"And then this memory is removed? So, he won't recall what happened?" asked Scrimgeour.

"No, Minister. We wouldn't remove the memory entirely. To do so would be too dangerous. The memories, while ...strangling...Harry now are too much a part of who he is to remove. They are part of his life and must remain. What we would aim to do is loosen the hold those memories have on him. Traumatic memories are usually seared deeply into the brain. If we can pry the memories loose, slacken their grip, the patient is usually able to remember the painful event without being overcome by it."

Dumbledore spoke again. "How is this accomplished? How long does it take?"

"Each memory has to be separately isolated and pulled free. How long this takes depends upon how deeply the memory has been scarred into the brain. The deeper the scarring, the longer the process. The patient has to be conscious so that the true memory can be located, and not some dream or false vision, and so that it can be properly separated from healthy tissue. Since the process of extraction is quite painful, sessions are no longer than one hour. Our experience has been that we can remove up to fifteen minutes of a memory in that time if we are lucky."

"Fifteen minutes!" ejaculated Scrimgeour. "That will take months!"

"Yes, sir," nodded the Healer. "Depending upon the number of memories, and the depth of the scarring, we may very well be looking at months, if not years. Years of a treatment that will cause the boy pain. Years to help him enough so that he can live his life without drowning under the weight of his memories. But, sir, worst of all, is that we have no way to even start the treatment. He is an unwilling patient. As I've just explained, we need the patient to be coherent. Our usual patients are those who are eager to get past one or two traumatic events in their lives. They are cooperative with the treatment. Harry is not. If he won't let us into his mind, we have no way to help him."

An appalled silence fell over the chamber. "There must be some way to make him cooperate," said Scrimgeour hoarsely. "Can't we order him to do what he's told? He's underage!"

"There's no spell that I'm aware of that would force him to our will other than the Imperius Curse and we all know that Harry is adept at throwing off the effect of that spell."

Dumbledore had been thinking hard. His hands, palms together, were raised to his lips as if in prayer. He lowered them and said, "Essence of tricolor poppyweed."

“What?” asked the Minister. Healer Moulson looked interested.

“Hmmm,” she thought aloud.

Dumbledore explained. “It’s the juice of a plant that, when drunk, will make the person receptive to any suggestion. It acts like the Imperius Curse, but its effects are much more temporary. It’s not likely to last more than an hour or two. Unfortunately, like the Cheering potion Healer Moulson mentioned a short while ago, the poppyweed potion is not a long term solution. People build up resistance to its effects almost immediately.”

“So, how will this help?” demanded Scrimgeour.

“It should enable us to penetrate Harry’s mind at least once. We can see what the damage actually is. We will have a better idea what we’re dealing with.”

Scrimgeour threw his hands up. “Fine! I don’t think anyone would disagree that you should try to see just what we’re up against. But, if we can’t fix it, I’m not sure where we’re going with this!”

Dumbledore spoke calmly. “At the moment, I have no suggestion as to the course of treatment for him. But, perhaps, one step at a time?”

Nodding, Scrimgeour turned to the Healers. “We’ll want an update as soon as you’ve been able to use the poppyweed potion. Is it hard to get? When do you think you’ll be able to administer it?”

Healer Moulson conferred briefly with her colleagues. “Good news, Minister. We believe we may have some of the potion on hand at the hospital. If that’s the case, we’ll try to administer it tomorrow.”

Dumbledore interjected. “I beg your indulgence Healer Moulson on a request I would make. As we may have only this one chance to penetrate Harry’s mind, I would like to be present when the poppyweed is administered so that I may assist. I have no little talent in legilimency,” he said modestly. Even as Healer Moulson was

nodding, Dumbledore continued, "And, I would also request the presence of Professor Snape."

Scrimgeour's face set in hard lines. "Snape! That Death Eater!"

Dumbledore said calmly, "Minister, we've discussed this before and you know that Snape was a loyal member of the Order of the Phoenix. And, most importantly to us now, he is one of the most skilled legilimens I know."

Healer Moulson hesitated. "If you believe that this is wise, Professor Dumbledore, I will not say no. After all, you are technically Harry's guardian since he's a school-age minor who was enrolled at Hogwarts before he was..." Healer Moulson trailed off. She wasn't sure how to finish her sentence tactfully. Finally, she settled on, "... taken from the school."

Scrimgeour looked unhappy as he stood up in dismissal. "Let's plan on reconvening the Wizengamot tomorrow night, then, to discuss the results. In the meantime," he said grimly, addressing the other members of the Court, "everyone better start thinking about how we're going to handle this situation."

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Harry was a bit nervous that morning. The nurse on duty had told him that Ron and Hermione would be permitted to visit him today. He knew that he should be happy to see them but, mostly, he was dreading the visit. He wasn't sure what to say to them and he was afraid of how they would react to him. Would Ron treat him in the same sycophantic way he had treated the fake Harry Potter in their third year? Would he be just a famous face to them now?

He fleetingly wondered whether he should ask them for help in escaping from the hospital. He rejected the thought almost as quickly as it came. There was no way Hermione would ever agree and, considering that it was Ron's father who had come to get him at the diner, it was unlikely that Ron would be any more receptive than Hermione.

When Harry noticed two heads peering around the door of his room, he couldn't help smiling. Now that they were there, he realized he was glad that they had come, after all. Hermione entered the room first, in a blur of bushy hair and squeaks of welcome.

Ron followed behind, his face slowly turning as red as his hair. After Harry had hugged Hermione (which was a bit awkward, since he was sitting down in a chair), Ron held out his hand to shake Harry's. "Io, Harry."

"Hi, Ron."

"I...I just wanted to say," he began in a rush, "I'm really sorry I was such a prat about everything. You know. How I treated that fake Harry Potter! And, how I treated you, when I thought you had entered yourself into the Triwizard Tournament and all."

"There's no need to apologize," said Harry.

"Yes, there is," said Ron fiercely. "I'm embarrassed at how I behaved."

Hermione piped up. "Everyone is. Now that we know you're really Harry Potter, everyone is pretending that they always knew that Mark Twist was something special."

Ron snorted. "Even those who thought you had killed Cedric."

Harry turned pale at the mention of Cedric's name and Ron immediately looked sorry for having brought up the subject. Trying to turn the topic to something more upbeat, he said, "Anyway, when you return to Hogwarts, you'll finally be able to be on the Quidditch team. You don't have to hide who you are any more or spend so much time studying! Maybe Gryffindor will finally have a chance to win the House Cup."

"Of course Harry still thinks studying is important!" objected Hermione.

Harry found himself smiling at the typical byplay between his friends. "Sorry to disappoint you, Ron, but I'm not returning to Hogwarts, so I'm afraid I won't be able to be on the Gryffindor team."

"Not returning? Why not?" asked Ron.

"Oh, Harry, you can't neglect your studies!" warned Hermione.

Harry smiled wryly. "For one thing, I don't think they're letting me out of this hospital so quickly. For another thing, once they do let me go, I'm not staying. I have no place in the wizarding world. I've already told everyone this."

Ron and Hermione looked upset at these words. Hermione began, tentatively, "Harry, we understand that you're angry at everyone. But, you're a wizard and I don't think pretending you're not is the best approach."

Before Harry could argue, Ron interjected. "Besides, everyone really wants to say they're sorry and to thank you for getting rid of You Know Who. It's very selfish of you not to let them do that."

"Selfish! Of me!" Harry was shocked at this accusation.

Ron nodded firmly. "Yes. If someone wants to shake your hand and you won't take it, don't you think that's pretty rude? Well, it's the same thing. Everyone wants to pat you on the back and say thanks. You saved our world, for Merlin's sake! Just a little thing like that! It's not right not to accept our gratitude."

Harry shook his head in disbelief. "So now I'm the one to blame for having been treated so poorly I don't want to stay around?"

Hermione looked stricken. "That's not what Ron means! Of course no one blames you for anything!"

Ron didn't back down. "You're turning it around. You know I didn't mean that! I'm just saying that you shouldn't reject our...overtures of friendship!"

Harry felt his annoyance fade and he couldn't help smiling slightly. "Overtures of friendship! You sound like a politician."

Ron blushed but smiled. "Just don't repeat that to the twins. I'll never hear the end of it."

A nurse wheeled in some lunch for the three. As Harry took a bite of his sandwich, he thought that it was a relief that Ron didn't seem to be treating him with kid gloves. Ron had been willing to disagree and argue with him. Maybe Ron could handle being friends with the famous Harry Potter after all.

Harry took a deep gulp of the pumpkin juice. It had been years since he had tasted it. He had forgotten how refreshing it was. He had finished his second glass of juice when he felt a strange lethargy start to spread over him. He noticed that Hermione and Ron had the same glazed expressions starting to cross their faces. The door opened and a number of adults entered. On either side of Ron and Hermione, nurses gently suggested that the teens come with them and the two obediently left the room without protest. Harry watched without alarm. He felt so relaxed. He noticed with a slight sense of surprise, but no concern, that Professor Dumbledore and Professor Snape were entering the room now too.

"Professors!" he said. "Why are you here?"

Snape didn't answer. Dumbledore said soothingly. "We came to say hello, Harry."

"Oh."

"Why don't you lie back in bed? You'll be more comfortable."

As soon as Dumbledore made the suggestion, Harry thought it was the most sensible suggestion he had ever heard. "Sure," he said agreeably, and he stood up from his chair. A nurse helped support him as he climbed into bed. He usually found such assistance annoying but, this time, it didn't bother him at all.

Harry had met all of the Healers present at one time or other over the past few days. He didn't remember all of their names but the eldest Healer he remembered was named Moulson. He noticed that she was holding her wand, and he asked her with slight interest, "What are you going to do?"

Softly, she said, "Don't worry, Harry. I want you to relax."

Harry felt his body relax completely. It was a marvelous sensation. He didn't remember ever feeling as relaxed in his life. He gave a little moan of relief.

"That feels good, doesn't it, Harry?" she continued, still using a soft, calm voice.

"Now, I don't want you to be alarmed, Harry. Everyone here is interested only in helping you. I want you to carefully lower the wall around your mind."

Harry had a fleeting thought that this was not a good idea but the thought vanished before he could hold on to it. He reached inside his mind and found the wall blocking access to his thoughts. He considered it for a moment, wondering what to do.

"Can you take down that wall, Harry? Or put a door in it?"

That was a good idea, Harry thought. With a mental sweep, he put a door in the wall. He felt a slight push at his mind. He turned around and saw that Healer Moulson was there with him, inside his head. Before he could become alarmed, he heard her say, "Very good, Harry. Just relax. That's it. Relax. Take a deep breath, Harry."

Harry took a deep breath and relaxed.

In his mind, he saw Healer Moulson try to open the door. It was locked. She gave a little huff, and said, "Would you mind unlocking the door, Harry?"

“Oh,” he said. And, with a click, the door in the wall in his mind opened. Healer Moulson pushed the door open but did not enter.

“Now, Harry, I’m going to go inside. Everyone here is going to be joining me. We’re just going to take a look around and see some of your memories. I want you to just keep relaxing. No matter what we see, you are not to become alarmed. I want you to keep your mind wide open. As open as you can. You are not to shut that door. Okay?”

“Okay,” said Harry.

It was a strange sensation to feel so many people in his head. He had never let anyone in before and now he was permitting unlimited access. As they poked at various memories, they flooded back to him. But the thoughts were a jumble. There were too many people poking at different sections of his thoughts for him to grab onto any one memory clearly. But, since they appeared to only be interested in unhappy or frightening memories, there rose in Harry a sense of sadness and pain. He started to moan. He heard Healer Moulson tell him softly again, “Remember, Harry. Relax.” He relaxed.

They had been curious to see how the boy organized his mind. Everyone visualized their thoughts in slightly different ways. For example, some people’s minds were a series of different shape and size ropes, twisted together. Other people’s thoughts manifested themselves as little bubbles, of different sizes and colors, stacked on top of each other. There were innumerable ways for people to envision their mind at work.

Harry had organized his mind into rooms, connected by hallways. The damage was worse than they expected. The walls of each room gleamed gold and white. But, running down the walls, like blood seeping through the very foundation, was a dark, tar-like substance.

Snape approached one such patch and, curiously, poked it with his wand. An unearthly scream rose from the goo. Unprepared, he took a hasty step back. Then, slowly he approached it again and tried to wipe it away. The splotch remained where it was. Irritated, the wizard

remembered what Dumbledore had told him about Healer Moulson's recommended course of treatment. Turning his wand upon the stain, he carefully tried to scrape under one corner, lifting it from the wall underneath.

Harry groaned loudly and arched his back. Healer Moulson said quickly, "Harry, lie still! Calm down! I know some of this might be painful. We're truly sorry. But, lie still!"

Harry felt as if his brain were on fire. He lay still, as directed, and panted with his mouth open.

Inside his head, Healer Moulson and the others continued looking through the various rooms in Harry's mind. Snape stayed in the first room he had found and continued to attack the goo with a dedicated fury, as if its presence were a personal insult to him. He had hesitated briefly when the boy had first groaned but, had soon resumed his fight with the stain, scraping away at the patch. Finally, when Snape stood back, he was surprised to find that he was breathing heavily. He was vaguely aware that a sheen of sweat covered his brow. His fight with the stain had taken a lot of work. But, he saw with satisfaction, the stain was no longer stuck to the wall. It hovered, instead, a hairsbreadth away, floating so closely to the wall, it was hard to tell that it wasn't stuck there. The wall itself had a slight shadow on it where the patch had been, but the golden color was able to shine through.

The professor poked his wand at the patch again and watched the memory unfold. He saw, as if looking from Voldemort's own eyes, the Dark Lord casually torture a muggle woman. The woman was sobbing and screaming, begging Voldemort to leave her alone. Snape's mouth tightened. He could have told the woman to hold her breath. Voldemort never responded to begging. If anything, it had made him more cruel. A young child ran out of a room behind the woman. The woman called to the child to run away, but the little boy ran at Voldemort, beating him with his tiny fists, yelling at Voldemort to leave his mother alone. Voldemort, laughing wildly, killed the child. The woman's shriek caused the hair on the back of Snape's neck to stand on end. Smiling happily, Voldemort killed the woman too. The memory ended.

Dumbledore appeared at the door to the room where Snape was standing. "We have to leave, Severus. The effect of the poppyweed will be wearing off soon."

Without a word, Snape followed Dumbledore out of the room and through the door in the wall protecting Harry's mind. The other Healers had already gone through. Leaving Harry's mind, Snape gave himself a little shake to clear his head. He noticed that the Healers and Dumbledore were all looking very pale from the experience.

Healer Moulson was bending over the teen, who lay still in the bed. Harry's skin was cold and his eyes were open and glassy. He was breathing in short little bursts.

"What's wrong with him?" demanded Snape.

"You freed him from one of his memories," explained one of the other Healers, as Healer Moulson continued to look over the boy. "As we've said, it's a painful process. He's in a bit of shock from the pain. We'll give him a soother and he should be alright soon."

A nurse hurried up with a potion, which she handed to Healer Moulson. The woman took the cup and held it to Harry's lips. "You've been very good, Harry. Just one more thing. I want you to drink this all up. It'll make you feel better, I promise."

Harry hesitated. It was clear that the poppyweed was wearing off. Healer Moulson sharpened her voice, "You heard me, Harry. Drink this up, now!"

Harry drank. He gave a little shudder and relaxed into a light sleep. With a sigh of relief, the elderly wizard, lay the boy's head back on the pillow. "He'll be fine when he wakes," she said. "Of course, he'll be furious that we intruded into his thoughts. Just one more reason not to trust us."

the Healer

One of the other Healers tentatively suggested that it would be best to leave the boy alone. Nodding, Healer Moulson gestured for everyone to follow her. They convened in one of the hospital conference rooms and looked miserably at each other.

Dumbledore finally said what the others were thinking. "Your diagnosis appears to have been accurate, Lucretia. Harry does indeed appear to be overwhelmed by memories so foul that they are sucking the life from him."

Healer Moulson nodded, sadly. "I've never seen a case like this. I don't know what to suggest."

Snape interjected, "What do you mean you don't know what to suggest? The memory I scraped off the...wall...of his thoughts came away eventually. That's the treatment you had suggested to the Wizengamot, wasn't it?"

"In Harry's case, it's clear that this will take months, if not years, before we can see an appreciable difference in freeing his mind."

"Then the sooner we begin, the better!" said Snape harshly.

"Yes, but, as I also told the Wizengamot, we need a patient willing to let us into his mind."

"There must be a way to insist!" snapped the teacher.

Dumbledore interjected, speaking quietly to diffuse the tension in the room. "Severus, I know you are concerned for the boy..."

"I'm not concerned!" objected Snape hastily. "I am irritated...irritated that an underage wizard is defying what Healers and other adults around him are telling him to do! It's for his own good!"

There was a knock at the door and a nurse apologetically stuck her head inside. "I'm very sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Weasley and Ms. Granger are no longer under the effects of the poppyweed potion and

they are very upset. They are concerned about Harry and insisting on seeing him. What should I do?"

Snape looked angry and opened his mouth to say something no doubt very cutting. Dumbledore held up a hand to halt the teacher. "Why don't you bring them in here? I think they deserve to know why we used them as we did. I have been learning that we make a mistake when we don't communicate with our young."

Snape looked as if he disagreed, but he held his tongue.

Ron and Hermione entered the room clearly in a fighting mood. They both stopped short when they saw so many adults. "Professor Dumbledore!" Hermione gasped. Ron's mouth fell open a bit.

The headmaster inclined his head. "Mr. Weasley. Ms. Granger," he said in greeting. "You are, understandably, upset about what has just occurred. I'd like to explain, but I must ask that you not interrupt until I am done."

The teens exchanged concerned looks. Looking worried, they both nodded in agreement.

"You both are too smart not to realize that people can be injured both physically and mentally. Physical injuries are often easy to see. While we do not always see mental injuries, their effect is no less real. Sometimes, we can see the manifestations of a mental disturbance. In Harry's case, the manifestation is clear. He is slowly dying."

Hermione gasped and raised her hands to cover her mouth in horror. Ron shook his head in denial and clenched his hands into fists. But, neither teen spoke. They continued to look intently at Dumbledore.

"In order to help Harry, we needed to look inside his head. Harry was not prepared to let us into his mind. His defenses are too strong for us to use force. We used essence of poppyweed to pull down those defenses temporarily. In order not to have him try to fight its effects, or put up some other defense to keep us from entering his mind while it was still in his system, we didn't want him to suspect

that he had taken any potion. We knew he wouldn't suspect that we'd put anything in a drink that you both would be drinking as well, so we put the poppyweed in the pumpkin juice. We are sorry to have had to involve you in this scheme."

"That doesn't matter!" Ron burst out. "I don't care that you made us drink the potion." Hermione nodded. "What about Harry?"

"We were able to enter Harry's mind. We have confirmed the Healers' fears; his memories are overwhelming him. We must find a way to loosen their hold on his mind, or he will not be able to be free of their strangling effect."

Dumbledore's explanation seemed at an end, so Hermione chanced a question. She gulped and asked, her voice shaking, "What are you going to do?"

Dumbledore hesitated and, apparently thinking it best to be open, continued. "We don't know. We need Harry to let us into his mind in order to start working to pull the memories loose. That's the best way I can describe it. It's a long term process and there doesn't seem to be a way to convince Harry to let us into his mind so that we can do what needs to be done. The Imperius Curse doesn't work on him and the poppyweed potion is just a temporary measure."

"If you explain to him..." began Hermione.

She stopped at Dumbledore's raised eyebrow. Under her breath, she completed Dumbledore's unspoken message, "He won't listen. He doesn't trust anyone."

"He's underage," offered Ron.

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes, but even children can't be forced to open their minds, as much as some parents wish that they could!"

"So, no one knows how to make him listen? And, if he doesn't listen, he'll...die?" Hermione almost whispered the last word.

The silence in the room was all the confirmation needed.

“He’s got to be forced!” said Ron, fiercely. “He can’t die!”

“Mr. Weasley, we are trying our best!” interjected Healer Moulson.

“It’s too bad he’s not a house elf,” Ron muttered. “They do what they’re told.”

Hermione said desperately. “It can’t be that only house elves have to obey. What’s the magic that binds them?”

“It’s old magic that no one really understands,” said one of the Healers.

Dumbledore, meanwhile, had a strange look on his face. Hermione’s question had obviously sparked a thought.

“What, headmaster?” demanded Snape. “I can tell you are thinking of something!”

He hesitated, then said slowly. “Ms. Granger is right. House elves are not the only beings that have to obey. Servants do, too.”

There was a heavy silence. Then Snape repeated, his voice considering. “An indenture.”

Dumbledore nodded. “It could be done. He could be bound.”

“Yes,” said Snape softly. “It could be done.”

Hermione looked in puzzlement from the headmaster to the potions teacher. “What are you talking about? What do you mean?” she asked.

Speaking in a low voice, as if still thinking aloud, Dumbledore explained. “There are times when a wizard is bound to a family as an indentured servant. Sometimes, it is to pay off a debt. Sometimes, it is in punishment for a crime that doesn’t warrant Azkaban. That

wizard is bound to follow the orders of the family until the period of the indenture ends.”

“Like a slave?” asked Hermione, shocked.

“No, Miss Granger. The rules governing the relationship establish firm limits in what a master can order a servant to do. But, I believe the master could order the servant to open his mind.”

“Yes,” whispered Healer Moulson, looking appalled even as she agreed.

The other Healers started speaking excitedly among themselves. Ron, looking so pale his freckles stood out vividly, stepped forward. “You would make Harry a servant? You would do this to him? The savior of the wizarding world!” Despite his best efforts to control himself, his voice rose sharply at the end.

“And what do you suggest?” snapped Snape, reminding Ron why the professor was his least favorite teacher. “Do we let the ‘savior of the wizarding world’ die? Do we stand aside and wring our hands and wonder what to do as he is eaten up by the memories of the horrors he has witnessed?”

“It would be like an intervention in the muggle world. But, he will never forgive us. Never.” Hermione’s voice was low. She couldn’t help the tear sliding down her cheeks.

“Maybe not,” dismissed Snape brusquely. “But, he’d be alive!”

Dumbledore brought the conversation to a close. “I must ask you both not to discuss anything you have heard here with anyone else. It is a confidential matter for the Wizengamot at the moment. There is an emergency session already convened for this evening to discuss what we have learned today. We will make our recommendation to the Court.”

Ron shook his head cynically. “They’ll do whatever you suggest.”

Dumbledore's mouth tightened. "Mr. Weasley. Any recommendation I make regarding Harry will be with his best interest in mind."

"Like when he was a baby?!" accused Ron.

Dumbledore drew in a shocked breath. "Insolent boy!" shouted Snape angrily.

Ron looked astonished at his own daring but he didn't retract what he had said. Dumbledore nodded slowly and then said, "I deserved that. You are right to question my motives. Harry certainly does. I have lost his trust but I hope that I can still ask for yours. It is true that I did not always put Harry's interests first. I had to consider the needs of the wider public. But, I have always been concerned about Harry. I deeply desire his well-being and happiness. I will do everything in my power to help secure for him a future where he can finally find the peace and love he so richly deserves."

Dumbledore had spoken from the heart and Ron's anger subsided.

Hermione, in a squeaky voice, laden with tears, asked, "How long would the indenture have to last? To whom would he be indentured?"

Dumbledore shook his head. "I think at this time, any further discussion on this matter will have to wait until the Wizengamot has made its decision."

Looking miserable, but no longer protesting, the teens were ushered out of the room. The Healers bade the Professors a good day as well, knowing that they would see each other later that night at the Wizengamot.

Dumbledore and Snape were the last remaining in the room. The headmaster seemed as burdened with care as Snape ever recalled seeing him. "It will be for the best," Snape said softly.

"Ms. Granger is right," said the older wizard, sadly. "He will never forgive us."

“Then he’s as much a fool as his father ever was,” said Snape dismissively.

Dumbledore smiled wryly. “I don’t imagine that you would be thrilled if anyone chose to play around in your head, Severus.”

Snape refused to give the headmaster the satisfaction of agreeing, so he kept silent.

With a sigh, the headmaster swept from the room to return to Hogwarts.

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Chapter Twenty Six – Year Six; The Intervention

Harry came slowly awake. At first, his head was fuzzy and he had a vague headache. He sat up in bed and took a cautious sip of water from the glass on the table next to his bed.

As his head cleared, Harry remembered as if in a dream the Healers who had surrounded his bed earlier that day. Wait. Dumbledore had been there too. And Snape, of all the strange people.

With dawning horror, Harry realized that this recollection wasn't a dream. This had really happened. He dove inside his own head and searched the wall that he was accustomed to seeing there. Yes! There was a door in the wall! A door that had never been there before!

They had tricked him! The bas-ards! They had given him something in the food or drink that Ron and Hermione had also eaten. He remembered that they had looked oddly drugged before the Healers had entered the room.

Dumbledore again! He and the Healers had done this. They had rummaged around in his head. Harry gave a cry of rage. He leapt from the bed, shoved his glasses onto his face and, overturned the side table there. The water glass and jug fell to the floor with a crash and water splashed on the floor. Harry gave another cry of fury.

He heard footsteps hurrying toward him. His eyes blazed as he turned to face the door. Two male nurses entered, along with a Healer. They had obviously been expecting his anger. Usually, female nurses attended to him. Without stopping to think, Harry threw himself at the person nearest him. He punched and kicked every inch he could reach. The other nurse came to the aid of his colleague and tried to pull the boy off the other man. Panting as he fought, Harry screamed, "You sons of bi-ches! You bloody bas-ard!"

"Calm down, Harry!" shouted the Healer behind him.

Harry ignored him. "Mr. Potter!" the Healer tried calling Harry's more formal name but it had no effect on the boy. The teen continued to

fight furiously. The attendants struggled to contain Harry without hurting him, but they were getting hurt themselves. The boy was in a rage and impossible to quiet.

The Healer tried again, using his sternest voice. "Mr. Potter! Stop this behavior instantly. If you don't, we will be forced to restrain you. I'm warning you!"

But, Harry was beyond listening. He continued to swear and throw punches and kicks.

"Petrificus Totalus!"

Harry felt his arms and legs snap to his side and freeze. He was pushed back onto the bed by the attendants, who were wheezing from the fight. He was unable to move and his fury built higher and higher. He felt as if he would burn up with the strength of his rage. Struggling to harness his anger, he sent his magic outward. It was unfocused and dispersed but strong.

Harry heard shouts above him but was unable to see what damage he had wrought. They had been inside his head! How dare they! Even Voldemort had never done that to him! The one place that was his alone – his mind – and they had invaded it. Harry screamed again inside his head. He sent another wave of unrestrained magic outward and heard more cries.

While he didn't know what he had done, he was grimly satisfied that he had lashed back at them. Those f'ing bas-ards!

"Finite incantatem." The body bind holding Harry was released and he jumped up from the bed once more. Looking around he noted with pleasure that the walls were scorched as if they had burst aflame. The nurses and Healer who had initially entered the room looked frazzled.

Healer Moulson had arrived, along with a score of other Healers and nurses. Harry stood shaking with anger and glared at the elderly Healer. From her raised wand, Harry could tell that she had been the

one to remove the spell on Harry. She regarded him with troubled eyes and spoke in a quiet voice. "Harry. I won't attempt to apologize. We did what we had to do. And, you've done the same."

That statement served its purpose. It distracted Harry. What did she mean?

Healer Moulson answered the boy's unspoken question. She continued in an unhurried manner, her voice at an even pitch. "You entered Voldemort's mind to read his thoughts. You didn't ask his permission either."

Well, hell! That was not the same thing at all! Harry had been trying to find a way to defeat the most dangerous wizard ever known and Healer Moulson was comparing that with her unauthorized access to his thoughts?

"Needs must, Harry," she continued, her voice carefully modulated. "That's an old muggle expression. It means that people do what is required."

"You had no right!" Harry fumed. But, the Healer was relieved to note, Harry's ragged breathing had started to slow and the flush began to fade from his face. The Healer noticed the signs that Harry was calming down, even before Harry realized it himself.

"We do have the right, Harry. We are Healers and we are trying to help you. But, we need not argue about this any longer. The Wizengamot is meeting tonight and they will decide what is to be done with you."

"What?!" This news took precedence over all else. While the invasion of his privacy was unforgivable, and Harry still wanted to tear St. Mungo's apart in fury when he thought about it, he was successfully diverted (as the Healer had hoped) from focusing on the incident. His fate was going to be decided tonight by the Wizengamot and Healer Moulson just casually mentioned this in passing!

Harry took an eager step forward. "Why hasn't anyone mentioned this to me before? What time am I going to the Ministry?"

The witch signaled most of the people in the room to leave. Harry barely noticed. He was wrapped up in the knowledge that he would finally face the Wizengamot. The last time he expected to be brought before them, Umbridge had send him to Azkaban without a trial instead. While the situations weren't the same, he was going to have to plead for his freedom now too.

"It won't be necessary for you to go the Ministry, Harry. They have all the information they need."

Harry felt a tingle of alarm run down his back. "All the information they need for what?"

"To decide the best course of medical treatment for you."

"Oh," said Harry. That didn't sound too ominous. But, it wasn't what he wanted to hear. "When will they decide when I can leave?"

"There's no question of that, Harry," said Healer Moulson firmly. "You are an underage wizard and you will not be permitted to wander around unsupervised again."

"That's ridiculous!" said Harry. "I'm not a child. I killed Voldemort!"

Healer Moulson couldn't stop the involuntary shudder at hearing the dreaded name again. But, her voice was steady and strict, reminding Harry of Professor McGonagall, when she said, "Be that as it may, you can stop wondering whether you are going to be allowed to return to the muggle world. The answer to that is no. We wouldn't have wasted months looking for you to throw you back now that we've found you. So stop wasting your time and energy fighting that."

Harry frowned and shot her an angry glare but seemed to accept what she had said. He sat back down on his bed. The Healer expected that the boy was feeling weak after the amount of energy he had released with his impressive temper tantrum. "When will I hear

what they've decided tonight, then?" he asked grudgingly, staring at the floor.

"I imagine that you'll be told tomorrow."

Harry looked up again with another flare of anger in his eyes. Healer Moulson continued matter-of-factly. "It will be late when a decision is made. It can wait until tomorrow. You're not going anywhere."

Harry snorted. He slid himself back into the bed and rested his head on the pillow. The room was starting to spin. Before he closed his eyes, and drifted reluctantly off to sleep, he warned, "Just stay out of my head!"

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The Wizengamot was out of control, with witches and wizards ignoring the rules of conduct to shout over each other to be heard. The news of the extent of Harry's "injuries" reported by Healer Moulson and her team had cast a pall over the session early on. But, it was Dumbledore's proposed solution that had acted as a bombshell.

Scrimgeour rapped his gavel repeatedly until finally the Court settled down. "Ladies and gentlemen! Please! Everyone will have a chance to be heard in due course. We must maintain some decorum."

Turning to Dumbledore, the Minister said, "I don't see how you can suggest such a thing! Placing Harry Potter under an indenture! The public would never stand for it!"

Dumbledore squared his shoulders and lifted his head high. "Our choice is between a bad situation or a worse one. I'm not willing to stand aside and let Harry drive himself into an early grave. We are left with limited options. The public will be outraged at first. I trust that we can make them understand that we take this step out of concern for the boy."

"It's out of the question!"

“I would be happy to hear any alternative suggestions.” Dumbledore waited and, at the silence, continued. “I do not make this proposal lightly. I am all too aware of what we owe to Harry. But, do not fool yourselves into thinking that Healer Moulson is being an alarmist. We heard what Harry said, during his battle with Voldemort: he said that he wished for death. He repeated this to the Aurors who brought him back from the muggle world. Harry has done so much, seen so much, suffered so much in his short life. But, he is still a child. He is only 16. We must stand in place of his parents to make the right choices for his future. I want to ensure that he has a future.”

Silence filled the chamber. Breaking the silence, Scrimgeour reluctantly asked, “How long would this indenture need to last?”

Dumbledore shared a quick look with Healer Moulson. “It is likely to require at least a year. More realistically, we are looking at longer. I suggest we consider an indenture through Harry’s eighteenth birthday – a little more than a year and a half”

Members of the Wizengamot whispered agitatedly among themselves until called to order once more.

“I was as reluctant as anyone here to consider this proposal,” said Healer Moulson. “But, in addition to helping with the course of treatment, there is another major benefit. We cannot watch Mr. Potter every minute. If he were to actively decide to end his life, I doubt that we could stop him. He is a very powerful wizard. But, once indentured, he would be unable to deliberately harm his person – his very body would belong to his ‘guardian’.”

There was a short silence as the Wizengamot absorbed this information.

“How could this even be done?” objected Scrimgeour. “He is not guilty of any crime. He owes no debt. The magical binding would not work.” He said this last with a note of hope in his voice.

“There is a way around this,” explained Dumbledore. “Technically, as headmaster of Hogwarts, I am his guardian. His parents are dead,

his relatives deemed unfit by the Wizengamot, and his godfather, Sirius Black also dead. In the interim period before another guardian is appointed, I am his acting guardian.”

“Are you saying that you could give permission for him to be bound?” demanded Scrimgeour.

“More than that. I would create the premise for the indenture itself. It was not unheard of, in years past, for children to be pledged as servants for the debts owed by their family. I believe that, once we choose Harry’s...protector...it will be a simple enough task for me to incur a debt to that wizard or witch and, as Harry’s guardian, pledge him in payment for that debt. The magical binding would hold.”

A shiver seemed to run through the Court. The incredible idea that Harry Potter – Harry Potter! – would be bound under an indentured seemed somehow more probable with the details of how this would be accomplished explained.

“Who,” Scrimgeour’s voice broke and he cleared his throat and started again. “Do you have someone in mind who would be...” He couldn’t bring himself to say the words.

Dumbledore nodded. “Yes. Severus Snape.”

The headmaster stood quietly as the second firestorm of the night raged around him. He had known that his suggestion was likely to meet with incredible resistance, not least from the potions master himself. Snape had risen from his seat in the visitor’s section of the chamber where he had been sitting with the Weasleys.

“I won’t do it!” yelled Snape. His cries were lost in the general uproar. Snape was furious. That meddling, old fool! Now, it was clear why Dumbledore had requested that he accompany him to the Wizengamot. Snape had come willingly enough, believing that the headmaster had wanted him in attendance in case details of the investigation into Harry’s mind became important. Little had he suspected what the headmaster had intended.

“Are you out of your mind? He’s a former Death Eater!” shouted Scrimgeour.

“Hear me out,” begged Dumbledore. Slowly, the uproar died down and Dumbledore proceeded. “I have the utmost faith that Severus Snape would never hurt Harry. He pledged himself to Harry’s safety when Harry was an infant. He spied against Voldemort at great risk to himself because of this pledge.”

Dumbledore continued to ignore the glares directed his way by Snape. “But, while Severus will not harm Harry, he has the ability to demand of him what most wizards who seek Harry’s well-being will have a hard time doing. The extraction process is painful. Whoever holds Harry’s indenture must be committed to this course of treatment, or what we are doing here is for naught. Severus is a strict disciplinarian, as his students have complained for years.” The light humor failed to relax the somber mood in the Court.

“In this case, discipline is required. While Healer Moulson, her team, and I were looking into Harry’s mind, appalled at the horrific visions we saw there, only Severus used his time to extract one of Harry’s memories. Harry is one step closer to the end of this process. As a skilled legilimens, Severus will be able to perform the extraction himself on any day where Harry cannot be treated by a Healer.

“And, there is another reason that I would recommend Severus for this role. I believe that it is essential for Harry to return to Hogwarts. Not just to complete his schooling, but to mingle with children his own age. He needs friends. He will have to live with whoever holds the indenture. Anyone other than a teacher at the school would mean that Harry would be separated from his peers.”

“Why can’t you be Harry’s...indentured guardian?”

“To my lasting regret, Harry harbors great resentment against me. He views me as the instrument of his childhood abuse and he blames me for not doing more to save him from Azkaban. This indenture will be an enormously difficult adjustment for Harry. I believe that Harry’s distrust of me would add to that difficulty. He bears no particular love

or hate toward Severus. He views him as just another teacher at Hogwarts.”

Snape could contain himself no longer. He waved his arms wildly, crossing and uncrossing them in front of him in vehement rejection of the proposal “I don’t care what reasons there may be to support my taking on the brat.” Gasps from the Wizengamot at this unflattering description of their savior. “You take a lot upon yourself Dumbledore! I have never said that I would agree to be Harry’s ... protector... or whatever else you want to call it. I have no intention of being saddled with him day in and day out for months on end. You wouldn’t have to worry about him killing himself! I would kill him!” Snape ignored the angry muttering from the witches and wizards watching. This felt like a personal battle between him and Dumbledore.

At Dumbledore’s lifted eyebrow and quizzical look, Snape snarled. “You know why, old man! He is just like his father! Arrogant! Refusing to listen to rules! Thinks he’s king of the world!”

“Now, now, Severus,” chided Dumbledore, gently. “I don’t think anyone can fairly accuse Harry of believing that he’s king of the world.”

“It’s just a matter of time! He’s the spitting image of his father.”

“He may look like his father, but his concern for others is from his mother. They say that eyes are the windows to the soul. It is Lilly Potter’s soul that is shining through Harry’s eyes.”

Arthur Weasley spoke up, unexpectedly. “I always heard that Lily was arrogant herself and fancied a Quidditch star. That’s why she hooked up with James.”

Snape went wild. “That’s not true! She was the most gentle and loving creature that ever existed. She didn’t care about fame. She only started seeing James Potter because he never left her alone. He was always trying to get her attention. Always sniffing around! He was her second choice! I was her first! She loved me!!”

There was a shocked silence in the Chamber. Snape's eyes flew wide and he turned an accusing look on the headmaster. He saw the little nod of thanks that Dumbledore awarded Arthur Weasley. Dumbledore had planned this! He had wanted to drive Snape to admit his love for Lily Potter. Snape flexed his hands, opening and unclosing his fists. If only he could wring the headmaster's neck!

Dumbledore continued quietly, "As I said, I believe that we can trust that Severus will never harm Lily Potter's son."

Speaking through gritted teeth, Snape said, "You may want to wrap it up in a nice little ribbon, but you can't hide what this really is. We are talking about binding this boy to be an indentured servant. Whoever is the Golden Boy's master will be vilified and hated. I won't do it!"

"Yes," admitted Dumbledore. "This task is both an enormous responsibility and an enormous burden. Which is yet another reason why you are the logical choice. Most other witches or wizards wouldn't be able to stand this pressure. But you are strong. Perhaps one of the strongest and bravest men I know. You have been living with suspicion and dislike for years but have followed your course unflinchingly. And, when Harry is well, you will have proved to the world that you are not a Death Eater by having been the instrument to cure him!"

Scrimgeour turned a considering eye on Snape. "It is true," the Minister mused, "that it would be best if Harry continued at Hogwarts, maybe making a few public appearances from time to time, so that everyone could be assured that he was doing well. But, basically out of the public eye."

"So that everyone can pretend blissful ignorance that he's here unwillingly!" accused Snape.

Far from taking offense, the Minister seemed pleased that Snape understood the situation so well. "Exactly!" the Minister smiled. "Now, I must insist that there be no more outbursts in this Court."

Obediently, a few witches and wizards raised their hands and waited to be recognized by Scrimgeour. However, there were surprisingly few questions as most of those assembled seemed resigned to the course outlined by Dumbledore. Snape raised his hand and tried to speak further but the Minister refused to recognize him.

Scrimgeour had realized, as Dumbledore had expected him to do, the benefits of distancing the Ministry from the indenture. By appointing Snape to the role, the Minister was hopeful that the whole fiasco could be made to look like Hogwarts business. Harry would return to school and everyone would just view this situation as a teenager being forced to complete his education. Nothing alarming in that.

When all questions had been addressed and the only hand remaining in the air was Snape's, Scrimgeour said, "Now if there are no more questions from voting members of the Wizengamot, I will call for a vote. All in favor of placing Harry Potter under indenture until his eighteenth birthday without further reference to this Court, raise your hand."

After counting the votes, Scrimgeour called for objections as well. When the votes were tallied, the majority of the Wizengamot had agreed to the indenture. There was a feeling of palpable depression in the air. A few of the witches had tears in their eyes.

The Minister took a deep breath and shook his head. "I can't believe that we're doing this," he muttered under his breath. He continued aloud, "Does any voting member wish to be considered to hold the indenture?"

No one volunteered. The discussion that night had brought home to everyone the dangers of serving in this role.

"In that case, all in favor of Severus Snape?"

"Wait!" called Snape. "I didn't agree!"

He was roundly ignored.

There was no need to do a roll call of the objections; it had been unanimous. Snape was chosen.

The potions master narrowed his eyes and glared at all assembled. "You can't force me!" he spat.

Scrimgeour leaned forward in his seat and turned beady eyes upon the other man. "This refusal to act in the best interests of the boy could be misconstrued, Snape. You could have us thinking that maybe you are a Death Eater after all."

The threat was clear. Snape turned red from fury but held his tongue.

"Good," said the Minister, leaning back. "Let's proceed. There is no point in delaying. It would be best if Harry could be removed to Hogwarts before the public is advised of this... accommodation. Dumbledore, I look to you to perform the ceremony by tomorrow morning."

Dumbledore inclined his head in agreement. With a few more words in closing, Scrimgeour brought the Wizengamot session to an end.

The Weasleys, seeing the look on Snape's face, left as soon as they could, although they would have liked to speak with Dumbledore about Harry.

Snape stalked over to Dumbledore. A lesser man would have drawn back in fear. "You!" Snape began. Dumbledore lifted an eyebrow in interest. It made Snape even more angry. "You...you...think you can just pull our strings and have us dance to your tune!"

Calmly, Dumbledore replied, "You, more than anyone, know that some scars can sear the soul. While Harry is too angry to be able to think clearly now, there may come a time when he would welcome guidance and understanding from someone who shares some of the same experiences."

"I don't care! He is not my concern!"

Dumbledore looked stern. "Should I remind you that you are partly to blame for Harry's lack of parents?"

Snape turned pale. "That was low!"

"My principle concern is not your sensibilities, Severus. That boy deserves to be happy. I will not be squeamish about taking whatever steps I believe are appropriate to help achieve that end. Now, let us discuss how I will incur a debt to you that will be satisfied by the indenture."

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Harry was awakened the next morning by a nurse informing him that he was shortly to have visitors. She told him to get dressed. Harry was eager to know what the Wizengamot had decided the night before. The fact that he was being allowed out of hospital clothes must mean something, but what?

When Dumbledore and Snape entered his room, Harry recalled the last time he had seen them. He felt his anger rise at how they had entered his mind but he forced himself to hold his tongue. He contented himself with giving them an angry glare and refusing to greet them politely.

Snape seemed pissed off too. Harry wondered why. It wasn't as if Harry had tried to enter his mind without invitation!

Dumbledore led the conversation. "Harry, there are so many things I want to say to you, I don't quite know where to start." Harry refused to speak but Dumbledore had not been expecting this meeting to be easy. "I have long wanted to apologize profusely for so much of the past. Leaving you with your relatives, not trusting you as Mark Twist, not protecting you from Azkaban. There were reasons for all of my actions but the result is that you suffered. I can only say I'm sorry for all that has happened."

"Sorry doesn't begin to cover it!" Harry burst out.

“I know,” admitted the headmaster. “I don’t really expect you to forgive me. Someday, you may understand that people in positions of power are sometimes forced to make very difficult decisions.” The teen took on an obstinate expression, clearly unwilling to forgive.

Dumbledore sighed regretfully. It was too much to expect a boy of sixteen to understand the terrible dilemmas that a leader might confront. Dumbledore knew that, if faced with the same decisions again, he would make the same choices. But, that didn’t mean he didn’t regret the consequences of his choices. Looking at the too thin, pale boy standing so proudly and defiantly in front of him, Dumbledore wished that he could banish the shadows haunting those bright green eyes. Instead, he knew that Harry would soon believe that Dumbledore had betrayed him yet again.

Well, he had never been one to shrink from following the necessary course of action. So, taking a breath, he continued, “I am also sorry, Harry, for having invaded your private thoughts. Once again, you have every right to be furious. But, as I believe Healer Moulson has already explained, we took this step in the firm belief that you are at risk and we need to intervene to provide you with the necessary medical assistance.”

Harry’s jaw clenched. “I don’t need any help. I certainly don’t need anyone poking around in my head. You had no right to be there.” Harry’s voice became louder as he kept talking.

“I am sure, Harry, that you would like to continue to express your extreme displeasure with us about what happened yesterday. However, as you are aware, the Wizengamot met yesterday night. Would you prefer to take this opportunity to yell at us or should I tell you what was decided by the Wizengamot?”

Harry tightened his lips in annoyance and waved for Dumbledore to continue speaking.

“All right, then, I will not keep you waiting. It has been decided that you will return to Hogwarts to finish your education.”

Harry considered this. It was not unexpected. He wasn't happy that he was being forced to do anything, but returning to Hogwarts was certainly preferable to remaining at St. Mungo's.

Harry nodded curtly in understanding. Dumbledore continued. "While at Hogwarts, you will need to continue a course of treatment. That treatment entails loosening some of the memories that you have."

Harry was confused. Giving up the silent treatment, he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Some of your memories are acting like a poison in your mind. We need to reduce the effect of those memories by easing how deeply they are embedded."

Harry started to look alarmed. Dumbledore went on. "When we visited your thoughts yesterday, were you aware of how Professor Snape scraped at one of your memories?"

"Yes," whispered Harry. He recalled the horror of the memory that Snape's probing had made him relive and the pain from whatever Snape had been doing.

"That particular memory, while still horrific, is not seared into your thoughts with the same intensity as before. This same process will need to be done with many more of your memories."

Harry staggered backwards. "No!" He understood. They meant to go inside his thoughts again. They meant to see his private memories.

Dumbledore continued as if not interrupted. "While at Hogwarts, you will meet daily with Professor Snape or a visiting Healer for about an hour. They will work to loosen the hold these memories have on you so that, over time, they will no longer overwhelm you."

Harry shook his head in mute rejection. Dumbledore turned to Snape and, addressing the potions master, asked, "Are you willing to accept the service of Harry Potter in satisfaction of my debt?"

Looking like he would spit nails, Snape said, "I am." It was the first time that Snape had spoken since he entered the room.

Dumbledore swished his wand through the air and Harry felt a strange humming throughout his body. His heart gave a little squeeze and his breath caught in his throat. He reached up a hand to soothe his throat but the sensation had already lifted.

Harry wasn't sure what had happened but he was alarmed. "What did you do?" he asked. "What's happening?"

"I do not want you to be alarmed, Harry..." began Dumbledore.

"People are always saying that to me before they do something I don't want them to do!" snapped Harry.

The headmaster smiled. "You are no doubt right, Harry. But, it is nonetheless true that everything we are doing, we are doing with your best interests in mind."

"I am the judge of what is best for me!"

"I regret having to disagree. It is the irritating habit of adults to believe that they know better than children."

"Just like you thought it 'best' for me to go to Azkaban?!" Harry accused furiously.

Dumbledore's smile disappeared. "Harry, leaving you in Azkaban was the hardest thing I've ever done. For what it's worth, I want you to know that we tried to free you, but we failed."

Harry looked at Dumbledore intently. Was it true? Had Dumbledore tried to save him?

The headmaster continued. "I know that you've paid the price for many of the decisions I've made to help us defeat Voldemort. And now, I fear that you will once again feel that I have betrayed you. But,

I promise you, I care about you and am only doing what we believe necessary to help you."

Aware of Dumbledore's ability to be completely ruthless, Harry's eyes widened in panic. "What do you mean? What have you done?" he asked softly in alarm.

Dumbledore hesitated. Harry's anxiety built. It was so unusual to see the headmaster unsure of himself.

"Just tell him, for Merlin's sake!" urged Snape.

With two sets of angry eyes focused on him, Dumbledore felt it would be wisest to finish the explanations quickly. "The Wizengamot has agreed to appoint Professor Snape as your guardian of sorts until your eighteenth birthday."

Snape snorted. "Oh, this is ridiculous," he said. Taking over, he explained, bluntly, "Potter, you have been indentured to me for the next year and a half. During that period, you will obey my orders, which will include the order for you to open your mind for the Healers and myself to be able to loosen the memories that are causing you to have a death wish. There!"

Harry swayed on his feet. There was a horrible ringing in his ears. He had the horrible and humiliating sensation that he was going faint as he had done when he had been accused of killing Professor Moody.

He waited for the lightheadedness to pass. He swallowed hard and looked back at the older wizards. They were waiting for his reaction. Harry gathered up his dignity and, trying to maintain his composure, said bitterly, "Is this how I am to be repaid for killing Voldemort?"

Dumbledore refused to back down. "No, Harry. You will be repaid through receiving the gratitude and love of the wizarding world."

Harry ignored this. "You're unbelievable! How could you do this to me?!" He forced himself to think clearly. "And that spell you just performed. It's already done?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Yes. You are now bound to Professor Snape."

"What does it entail? Do I have to ... clean his rooms, make his meals?" Harry thought back to the chores he had to do while at the Dursleys.

Snape spoke up. "If I wanted you to do those things, then yes. You would do that, and more. But, I have no desire to see your presence any more than strictly necessary. You will attend Hogwarts as a student. You will continue to reside in Gryffindor Tower. You will come to my office every day at 8 o'clock at night for your treatment. Either I or a Healer will be there."

"But, if you ask me to do anything, I must obey?"

"There are parameters. I cannot ask you to do something illegal, for example."

Harry looked at Professor Snape with new eyes. He had never liked Snape but he had never disliked him as much as his fellow Gryffindors either. Now, this man was in control of him. Would he be mean and controlling like Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon?

"Do you promise not to order me to do anything other than for this memory thing that Professor Dumbledore was explaining?"

Snape shook his head. "I do not make any such promise. The reason we have had to take this extreme step, Potter, is because of your refusal to listen to your elders. Your refusal to act rationally. There may be other situations where you will need to do as you are told."

Harry clenched his teeth. "Any time I disagree with you, you will say I need to do as I am told!"

"I will make no promises. However, I will try not to abuse the position into which I find myself. I can assure you, Potter, I have no desire to hold your indenture."

Something in his tone made Harry realize that Snape was telling the truth. It made him feel marginally better that the professor was not happy about this situation.

“Gather up your things, Harry. We should be leaving,” said Dumbledore gently.

Harry shrugged. “I’m ready.” There was nothing that he needed to take, as he had already changed into a wizard’s robe that the hospital had provided. He had no personal items with him. Thinking of a new worry, he asked, “Will everyone know? You know? That I’m a...a servant?”

“You will not be treated as a servant, Harry,” said Dumbledore.

Once again, Snape was more blunt. “They will know of the indenture. It is sure to be reported in the Daily Prophet.” Seeing Harry’s stricken expression, the man softened slightly, and continued, “We will not stress the fact nor will you be asked to perform such duties as will remind them of your status.”

Harry flushed in humiliation. He closed his eyes and swallowed. When he opened them again, he gave no hint of his dismay. With a proud and haughty stare, he told the watching wizards, “I am ready to leave.”

Dumbledore hesitated. He wished that he had words of comfort to offer the boy but he suspected that Harry would not be receptive to anything he had to say.

Snape, in his typical gruff manner, said, “Come, Potter. You should be worrying less about your having to obey orders I may give you – which you should do whether you are under a spell or not -- and more about whether you will be able to pass my potions tests considering your lack of schooling the last year and a half.”

And with those cheering words, the potions master turned and led the way out of the room.

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Chapter Twenty Seven – Year Six; The Homecoming

They flooded to Dumbledore's office. The portraits lining the wall were expecting them and smiled, nodded or waved at Harry when he stepped out of the fireplace. Harry wasn't quite sure how to respond to their calls of "Well done!" and "Welcome back!" He blushed awkwardly and was silent.

"I'm sure Harry appreciates your good wishes," Dumbledore told the portraits. Harry gave a jerky nod.

Fawkes, Dumbledore's phoenix, ruffled his beautiful feathers, demanding attention. When Harry turned toward him, the bird gave a welcoming trill and the teen felt a warm glow at the sound.

"Hello, Fawkes," greeted Dumbledore. "I have not forgotten." The headmaster walked over to his desk and picked up a wand laying there. Holding the wand loosely, he turned to Harry. "Ollivander claims that this is one of his finest works. He has worked on it for months. When it was done, he gave it to me to hold for you. He told me that he wanted to have a special wand waiting for you when you returned. While the wand typically chooses the wizard, Ollivander was sure that this wand would be a perfect fit for you, as he has used the same core as was in your previous wand."

Harry looked in surprise from the wand to Dumbledore. "That's right, Harry. Fawkes offered to give up another feather for you. His feather is the magical core of your new wand."

Dumbledore held out the wand for Harry to take. Slowly, Harry approached and took the wand from Dumbledore. He felt that taking the wand was a tacit admission that he had indeed returned to the wizarding world. Fawkes gave another trill as Harry's hand closed over the wand.

A shock, like electricity, shot up Harry's arm when he grasped the wand. A few sparks flew out of its tip. Dumbledore smiled. Harry refused to show his pleasure but, secretly, he couldn't deny that holding a wand made his blood hum with energy. He knew that his

first wand had been snapped when he had been sent to Azkaban. Harry was glad that this wand had the same magical core. Testing the weight of the new wand in his hand, Harry felt as if he were becoming reacquainted with an old friend.

Harry pocketed the wand in silence. Dumbledore waited, apparently expecting something. Casting his mind back over the conversation, Harry said awkwardly, "Would you please tell Mr. Ollivander that I appreciate the wand?"

Dumbledore nodded. "I am sure he will be pleased that you liked it, Harry."

Snape gave an impatient click of his tongue. "If you're done here, headmaster," he said, "we should go to breakfast. I, for one, have had enough drama for the day and would like to enjoy my morning tea."

Dumbledore gestured to the door and said, "Shall we?"

Harry walked with jerky steps out of the office. This would be the first time he would meet the students as Harry Potter. The last time he had seen most of them, he was still Mark Twist. While many of them may have been present during his final duel with Voldemort, he hadn't noticed them. He had been too caught up in his battle to focus on the people in the Great Hall that night. Certainly, he hadn't spoken to them then.

As they walked through the corridors to the Great Hall, they passed a small handful of students on the way. The students respectfully stood aside to allow the headmaster and Professor Snape to pass. When they looked curiously to see who was with the older wizards, they gasped and froze. One of the boys in the group breathed, "Harry Potter!" But, other than this outburst, the group was unnaturally quiet.

Harry blushed slightly and avoided meeting anyone's eyes. He was glad he didn't recognize anyone in the group. After Harry and his escort had swept past the group, Harry could hear the excited chatter left in his wake. "Did you see him! That was Harry Potter! He's back!" He pretended he didn't hear them.

They entered the Great Hall through an entrance near the head table. Harry had never entered the Hall this way, as it was reserved for the teachers. It was breakfast time, and the Great Hall was packed with students, although it was not as full as it would be at dinner since some students preferred to sleep late rather than eat an early meal.

Harry made to go toward the Gryffindor table. With some relief, he noted that Ron and Hermione were there. However, Dumbledore placed a hand on his shoulder, to have him wait. "Harry, one moment please."

Even as Dumbledore was saying this, a few students had noticed that the headmaster had entered with Professor Snape and that there was a strange boy standing next to him. Simultaneously, a number of students throughout the Hall realized who the teen was and shouted, "Harry Potter!"

Immediately, students scrambled to their feet looking wildly around. There was a brief period of confusion when students who hadn't noticed Harry asked their neighbors frantically, "Where? Where is he?" Fingers pointed and, within a short time, the eyes of everyone were focused on Harry. The noise died down and there was utter quiet.

Harry stood awkwardly, not sure what to do. Dumbledore cleared his throat. "I see you have all noticed – quite loudly, I might add – that Harry Potter is back. For those of you who knew him as Mark Twist, it may you take a little bit of time to adjust to the change in identity but remember that he has already been your classmate, that you already know him, and he is not just a famous face. I know that you are all excited to welcome Harry back but I would ask that you give him some space. Let him settle back in to the routine of classes. He will be rejoining his year, returning to Gryffindor, and there will be plenty of time for you to speak with him throughout the term."

Harry stood with his back straight during Dumbledore's speech and looked over the heads of the students toward the entrance. He felt a surge of anger. So many of them had turned on him when his name had come out of the Goblet of Fire; had believed him capable of killing Cedric and Professor Moody. He tried to fuel his anger

because, he hated to admit it, he was very nervous. Having so many eyes focused on him was disconcerting. He tried to appear composed but he was anything but. His stomach was performing flip flops and he hoped he wouldn't be sick.

Dumbledore's speech seemed at an end, and Harry once again made to move toward Gryffindor table. However, Dumbledore tightened his hand slightly on Harry's shoulder. The headmaster smiled at the students, who were still craning their necks to see Harry better and said, "Now, perhaps, before Harry sits down and has breakfast, we should take this opportunity to welcome Harry back to Hogwarts."

It was as if they had been waiting for a signal. The students erupted. Anyone still seated stood up, with many students standing on the benches. They shouted and yelled, "Hip, Hip, Hooray!" There were cries of "Potter! Potter!" A few students put their fingers in their mouths and issued ear-splitting whistles. Some students stomped their feet and drummed their hands on the tables. Anything to make noise. The Slytherin table was more sedate, but they, too, were standing and clapping.

It was all Harry could have dreamed during the years he had imagined being welcomed as a hero...and it was overwhelming. He tried to hang onto his anger. He didn't want to forgive them. So many had been cold, even cruel, to Mark Twist. They didn't deserve for him to forgive them. But, despite himself, he felt his anger begin to fade a little. It was hard to be furious at people who were cheering him. But, he didn't know what to do. He gave a slight nod of his head and a small smile and wished the noise would stop. Finally, Dumbledore held up his hand and the Hall quieted. The headmaster gave a final squeeze of Harry's shoulder and let go.

Harry hurried off toward the Gryffindor table. He felt the eyes of everyone in the Hall following him. He squeezed in between Ron and Hermione, who quickly made room for him. A clean plate magically appeared in front of him. There was silence in the Hall, as everyone waited to see if they could overhear Harry say something. However, Harry said nothing and Ron and Hermione, wisely, allowed their friend to sit quietly. After a while, the Hall filled with conversation

again, although Harry knew that he was under observation at all times.

“Welcome back, Harry.” Harry looked up at the soft words. Ginny Weasley was sitting across from him. She smiled happily at him.

Harry muttered, “Thanks!” and looked down at his plate, using the pretext of filling it with food to look away. She was yet another surprise in a day full of them. She had certainly grown up! She had always been pretty but now she was lovelier than ever.

He picked at his food, pushing it around on his plate. He took a few bites of the toast but it roiled around in his stomach. The back of his neck prickled from the feeling that people were staring at him. It was hard to imagine that, less than a week ago, he had been clearing tables at the diner.

When, mercifully, breakfast drew to a close, Ron elbowed Harry and rose from the table. “Come on. We’ve got Transfiguration first. You know McGonagall. We better not be late.”

Harry rose eagerly to follow Ron. He was all too happy to leave the Great Hall. He was aware of the heightened interest of the students as he stood up. First, there was a decrease in the noise volume, followed but a sudden upsurge as neighbors whispered excitedly about him. It was very weird.

Harry hurried to exit the Great Hall, but out of the corner of his eye, he realized that someone was also hurrying toward the doors, trying to intercept him. Harry stopped and looked up. Draco Malfoy was headed his way.

Draco slowed his pace when he saw that Harry wasn’t going to leave the Hall before he had had a chance to speak with him. Draco sized up the other boy in the moments before he reached him. It was strange to realize that this handsome, dark-haired boy, with the piercing green eyes had been masquerading as Mark Twist. No one could have accused Mark of being good-looking. Why would Harry have chosen to hide behind an unattractive face? And, pretending to

be a muggleborn, for Merlin's sake! Draco gave a mental shudder at the thought.

Harry looked as if he had been ill. That's what he got for running away to live with muggles, Draco thought. They were so primitive! It's a wonder that they knew how to build houses and keep themselves clothed. Why in the world Harry would have wanted to go live among them, Draco would never understand.

Reaching Harry, Draco took a deep breath. "Welcome back, Potter," he said. His voice was haughty, even to his own ears. Well, he was a Malfoy, wasn't he? He had a right to his pride.

"Thank you," Harry returned, watching Draco with steady eyes.

Draco was aware that they were the focus of attention from their fellow students. He lifted his chin up further and his voice became even haughtier as he continued. "I know we didn't get along so well when you were here before but I don't want us to be enemies any longer. I ...I just wanted you to know that." Draco stuck out his hand.

Harry stared at Draco's hand for a second and Draco started to turn red, thinking that Harry would refuse to shake it. Then, Harry raised his own hand and grasped Draco's in his. He gave Draco's hand a short but strong shake before releasing it. "We're not enemies, Draco," said Harry. "We're both on the same side, for all of our stupid little fights over the years. You proved that in the end."

Draco gave a wry smile. "Who knows? Maybe we'll even end up friends."

Harry didn't smile back. He was remembering how Voldemort had frequently taken out his displeasure on the disappointing "Death Eater". He gazed intently at Draco and said seriously, "I would like that."

Then, Harry turned to follow Ron and Hermione, who had been waiting patiently, to go to Transfiguration class.

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On the way to class, Hermione told Harry that Draco and the other Slytherins were not as obnoxious as they had been before Voldemort had risen to power. They, like the rest of the wizarding world, had learned their lesson – realizing that their hatred of muggles and muggleborns had unleashed a terrible scourge down upon their world. She explained how the Ministry and Hogwarts had instituted a number of reforms in the aftermath of Voldemort's defeat.

Harry was surprised that the wizarding world had taken any steps to address its intolerance and prejudice. Maybe there was hope for them after all. He was particularly pleased to learn that the new rules for muggle protection were called the Lily Potter Amendments. His knew his mother would have been proud.

Harry sniggered when he learned that non-muggleborns had to attend a Muggles Studies class. He could just imagine how Draco enjoyed that class!

People called out to Harry as he walked down the corridor. There were shy calls of "hello" or "welcome back" and loud calls of "Hey, Potter! Way to go!" A few people slapped him on the back or touched his arm as they passed.

Harry had told himself that he had put aside his boyish dreams that he would one day be treated as a hero. But, here was the reality. People were looking at him with admiration. And, in the younger children, even hero worship.

Harry felt a tightness in his throat. All his life, he had been used to the Dursleys telling him that he was worthless. They had only looked his way to find fault. Then, at Hogwarts, he had often been eyed with suspicion – a muggleborn wizard who seemed to have an affinity for the Dark Arts. For the first time in his life, Harry was on the receiving end of praise and respect.

It was wonderful. Yes, he didn't deserve it. If they only knew how unclean he was! But why not enjoy it? It was overwhelming, a bit alarming and even a bit embarrassing. He didn't quite know how to respond. But, he had to admit it was fabulous. He knew he couldn't

trust them not to turn on him again. Hadn't they shown (as indeed was true of everyone) that they weren't to be trusted? So, who knew how long this would last? No. As he had told Dumbledore the night he had defeated Voldemort, Harry wasn't prepared to forgive and forget. But maybe, if he didn't forget that he could never trust them, if he never expected more than they could give him, he could live among them. Accepted and admired – at least for the time being.

He recalled Ron's demand that he accept their "overtures of friendship." So, he walked with a small half-smile on his face, and gave a light nod from time to time, to show that he didn't mind their approaches.

Watching him as he entered her class, Professor McGonagall mused to herself that he looked like royalty out among his subjects. Knowing that structure and routine would help Harry adjust, she cleared her throat and called the class to order. She gave Harry a warm smile but otherwise did not single him out.

Harry sat quietly during the lesson. Transfiguration was one of the subjects that Voldemort knew well and which Harry had "studied" during the months he had inhabited Voldemort's brain. It was ridiculously easy for Harry to perform the tasks to which Professor McGonagall set the class. Bored, Harry contented himself with looking around the class to see how the other students were managing. Hermione's transfiguration was almost perfect, of course. Most of the other students were not as advanced as Hermione but were having some limited success with the exercise.

Neville, unfortunately, was still having trouble with his school work. The boy was sitting at the desk to Harry's right, sharing a table with Seamus. Neville had greeted Harry awkwardly at lunch, but hadn't spoken to him since. Harry had always gotten along well with Neville as Mark Twist, so it was strange to consider that the other boy might be shy of him now.

Harry watched as Neville waved his wand to transfigure his teacup into a mouse without effect. "I can't do it! I'm useless!" he groaned in frustration.

Hearing these words, Harry spoke up. "You're fine, Neville. You're just dropping your shoulder before you cast the spell."

Neville jumped and turned bright red when he realized that Harry was speaking to him. Flustered, he muttered "Thanks!" He waved his wand again, this time lifting his shoulder high as he cast his spell. The teacup transfigured into a hamster. Ron and Seamus laughed; Harry hid a smile, not wanting to hurt Neville's feelings. But, he need not have worried. Neville was thrilled that he had transfigured his teacup into anything and smiled happily as he lifted the hamster in his palm. "Look! I did it!" he cried.

"Thanks, Harry!" This time, when he spoke to Harry, his voice was strong and he looked directly at him.

Good, thought Harry. Maybe it won't take Neville long to start treating me like a normal person.

Encouraged that the Transfiguration class hadn't been too bad, Harry made his way to Potions. He wasn't thrilled to be having a class with Professor Snape. He wondered, in vague alarm, whether being indentured to the Professor would impact the class in some way. He tried to calm himself with the recollection that Snape had promised not to take advantage of the indenture and he couldn't imagine how the indenture would make a difference. It's not like he was going to be washing Snape's clothes in class, or serving him tea, after all.

"You all right?" Ron asked, as they entered the class. "If you get too tired, I can take you down to the hospital wing. I don't think you should overdo your first day back."

"I'm fine," said Harry. It was true. He was tired but not with the numbing exhaustion of the last few weeks before Arthur Weasley and the other wizards had found him.

Harry wondered if Ron knew about the indenture but he didn't ask in case Ron didn't know. Harry didn't want to be the one to bring it up.

When Harry entered the class, he made his way to the back of the room. He preferred to stay out of Snape's way as much as possible. The class filled with students. As before, many of the other teens called out to Harry in greeting. Each smile, or cheery call, gave him a warm feeling in his stomach.

The students were seated when Professor Snape entered the room. As soon as he entered, Harry felt an irresistible compulsion to stand up. He stood. He could feel all eyes turn to him in surprise, wondering why he had stood. Harry could feel his face start to turn red and his stomach gave a lurch.

Although Harry was the only student standing, Professor Snape said, evenly, "Class be seated." Harry sat.

He missed the first words that the potions master was telling the class. There was a ringing in his ears and all of his joy in the day evaporated. He was an indentured servant. He didn't know what this entailed but it was clearly powerful magic. It had forced him to stand at attention when his "master" had entered the room. Even the Imperius Curse hadn't been able to force Harry to do what he hadn't wanted to do. But the indenture had acted so strongly, Harry had been powerless against it.

He raised unseeing eyes to Snape. The Professor was ignoring him. The teen swallowed over the lump in his throat. He prayed that he wouldn't cry.

Tuning back in, Harry heard the Professor tell the class to read the instructions on the blackboard and begin to brew the potion of the day. He felt again a compulsion seize him. He focused on the instructions with an intensity that was almost painful. He felt an overwhelming anxiety to complete the potion quickly and perfectly. It had to be perfect. When he was sure that he understood the directions, Harry gathered up the ingredients and started to work on brewing the potion. When Ron started cutting up a root in uneven strips, Harry said sharply, "No! Let me!" Seizing the knife from Ron, Harry carefully cut the root in perfect cubes. Ron looked taken aback, but he said nothing, and watched Harry with troubled eyes.

“Shall I...” began Ron.

“Shh!” snapped Harry. “I’m counting!” And, Harry carefully counted 3 ½ turns of the ladle.

When Harry had to get another ingredient from the storage cupboard, he cut in front of Hermione to get there first. “Harry!” she called in annoyance. He didn’t answer.

He hurried back to his cauldron and carefully measured the ingredient he needed to add to the potion. The potion emitted a light blue smoke. “It’s coming out well,” offered Ron, tentatively.

Harry shook his head in dismay. “The instructions say it is supposed to be medium blue. It’s no good!” He started to break into a sweat and his breath became labored.

Harry didn’t hear Professor Snape’s approach until the older wizard was directly behind him. “Potter,” said the Professor in a quiet voice. “The potion is fine.” Harry’s breathing immediately slowed and his anxiety started to fade. “You may sit back down.” Harry sat. “Please remain after class. I would like to speak with you.”

Harry nodded and said, “Yes, sir.”

The rest of the lesson passed in a blur to Harry. He felt as if he would explode at any minute. He now understood what being an indentured servant meant. It meant that he had no free will. Professor Snape controlled him! If he said “jump,” Harry would have no choice but to jump. They had done this to him! They had turned him into a ...slave, a puppet.

Harry was vaguely aware when the rest of the class filed out. He knew that the students were casting him curious looks, while Ron and Hermione looked worried. He was relieved when the room was quiet. When he sensed that Professor Snape was near, he raised his eyes to stare at the man who held his indenture.

“I apologize, Potter.” It was clear that these were not words that came often or easily to Snape. “I should have considered that the orders I give to the class would affect you differently. I will take care in the future as to how I phrase what I say around you.”

Harry choked, “I’m a slave!”

“No, Potter! You are not!” Snape paced around the room in agitation. He circled back to where Harry was sitting and, in a quieter voice, continued. “Do you know why I was picked to be your ‘guardian’?”

Harry shook his head.

“There were a number of reasons but one of them was that I loved your mother.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. He was shocked as much by the fact that Snape (Snape!) had loved his mother as the fact that the professor was admitting this to him.

“She was a talented witch. Kind. Loyal. And strong.” Without realizing it, Snape’s voice softened when he spoke about Lily. “She didn’t let anyone get away with anything. She stood up to friends and enemies alike if she thought that they were doing something wrong. She never wavered in doing what she thought was right. You are your mother’s son. You are kind, loyal and strong too. She would be proud of you.”

Harry’s green eyes glowed as they fixed on Snape’s every word. The potions master felt a shiver run down his spine. It was easy for him to imagine that Lily was looking at him at that very moment, looking at him through her son’s eyes. Listening to how he spoke to her son. Pleased with him.

“I know all there is to know about doing something you don’t want to do. I was a spy for fifteen years! You have suffered a lot in your life, Potter, but so have others. I expect you to show the world that you are nobody’s slave. Be strong. Be proud. You are under an

enchantment, yes. But, this is temporary and it doesn't take away your thoughts; it doesn't change who you are."

Harry stared at his unlikely supporter. He thought for a moment and then nodded his head. "Thank you, Professor," he said quietly.

Snape considered the boy and, apparently satisfied, nodded back. "You may leave, Potter." Harry stood and went to the door.

"Potter." Harry turned to face the professor once again. Snape continued, "I noticed at breakfast that you didn't eat much. I won't make it an order but I would ...suggest ...that you try to eat sensibly. You also need to rest. You are not required to attend your class following lunch, if you prefer to take a nap. At least for a few weeks, until you have recovered your strength." At Harry's skeptical look, Snape said, "There is no shame in recuperating, Harry." Harry started at Snape's use of his first name. Catching himself, and apparently irritated at his own softening, Snape hardened his voice and said, "Just don't take advantage of it."

"No, sir," Harry agreed.

Harry turned to leave once more but stopped again. This time, he was the one with something else on his mind. Turning back to the Professor, he asked, tentatively, "Sir? Did she love you back?"

Snape sucked in his breath. "I like to think so, Potter," he said quietly. "But, if she did, she fell out of love with me and grew to love your father instead." It was one of the hardest admissions he had ever had to make.

"What was he like?"

"Your father and I never got along. I was jealous of his interest in your mother. I thought he was immature and arrogant." Unable to resist, Snape said, "Unfortunately for you, you look exactly like him. It's a shame."

Harry didn't take offense. Instead, he conjured a mirror to float in the air in front of him. Snape was momentarily taken aback by how effortlessly the boy conjured an item out of thin air. This was highly advanced magic! Snape was distracted from this thought when he realized that Harry was staring intently into the mirror, studying his face. The boy lifted a hand to trace his face, looking at his reflection as he did so.

Snape realized, with a start, that Harry was not familiar with his own face. The boy had been living as Mark Twist for years. He had not returned to his own identity until his battle with Voldemort. Then, the boy had disappeared to the muggle world where he had been living in a cheap room, with the bare amenities. Perhaps there had been no mirror. Wouldn't he have sought out a mirror elsewhere? But, Snape reminded himself, the boy had been in a state of depression. Certainly, since his return to the wizarding world, he would not have seen any mirrors. There were none in the hospital ward. And, once he left St. Mungo's for Hogwarts, he had only been in the Great Hall and some classrooms. Was this moment the first time Harry was seeing what he looked like?

Well, he was a very handsome boy, Snape admitted grudgingly. James Potter had certainly taken advantage of his good looks, enjoying the adoration of legions of silly young girls.

The potions master waited for Harry to smile or give some other indication of being pleased with his looks. But, the boy just ran his hand over his face staring intently into the mirror as he did so. He seemed particularly interested in his eyes. Snape wondered whether he had been told that he had inherited the piercing, clear green color from his mother. Then, in a swift motion, Harry pushed back his bangs from his forehead, revealing his famous scar.

Holding his hair back with one hand, Harry traced the lightning bolt shape with the index finger of the other. Suddenly, Harry's eyes hardened, and he glared at the mirror. In a sudden burst of anger, Harry pointed his wand at the mirror and shouted, "Reducto!" and the mirror shattered into dust. Astounded, Snape stared at the place where the mirror had floated.

Harry looked back at the Professor, who was clearly surprised at his actions. Harry answered the unspoken question quietly. "I didn't get my looks from my parents only. Voldemort left his mark on me too. It condemned me to a life of pain. I agree with you Professor. I'm not too fond of my looks either."

With this, Harry left the room, leaving behind a stunned Professor.

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Chapter Twenty Eight - Year Six; Attracting Attention

The Great Hall was packed for lunch. By now, there wasn't anyone in the castle, living or dead, who hadn't heard that Harry Potter was there. People who had skipped breakfast were furious with themselves for having had the misfortune to miss his arrival. No one planned on missing lunchtime.

When Harry entered the Great Hall, everyone was already there and all eyes were on the entrance, waiting to see him when he arrived. There was a sudden hush when he appeared. He hesitated in the entry way. He wasn't quite sure what to do.

He had just come from Snape's class, where he had realized just what it meant to be under an indenture. He had learned the astonishing news that Snape – Snape! – had been in love with his mother. And, he had realized how closely he resembled his father, except for his green eyes, and his famous scar.

Now, with every eye on him, he felt exposed and raw. Were they trying to see his scar? Were they aware of his indenture? He should have given lunch a skip and hidden out in his dormitory room.

Coward! he called himself. Snape had said that his mother was strong. He had said that his mother would have been proud of him.

Holding his head high, Harry forced himself to walk with steady steps to the Gryffindor table. There was silence until he had seated himself and then a slow building hum as people started talking around him. It was disconcerting to realize that he was the topic of most conversations.

Ron smiled wryly. "That was some entrance."

"I wish people would stop staring," Harry muttered.

"They will eventually. Just give them a few days," encouraged Hermione

Harry looked awkwardly at his friends. "I want to apologize for what happened in potions class," he began.

"Yeah!" Ron frowned, remembering his annoyance. "What was that all about?"

"It was..." Harry hesitated. He wasn't sure how to explain.

Luckily, Hermione saved him from trying to find the words. "Was it because of the indenture?" she asked sympathetically.

"Oh, you know about that?" asked Harry. He lowered his eyes to his plate and pretended that he found his peas vastly interesting.

"I thought that might be the reason," she continued. "Snape told the class to do the assignment. But, for you, that was an order."

"Do you mean that Snape is the one Harry is indentured to?" asked Ron scandalized.

"Shh!" cautioned Harry. He was aware that other people were trying to listen to their conversation. He knew that everyone would shortly learn about his indenture anyway, but he preferred to delay that moment for as long as possible.

Hermione nodded her head. "I realized as soon as Snape entered the classroom and Harry stood up."

Ron looked appalled. "Snape! That's bloody awful!"

Ron's horrified expression made Harry want to laugh. "That's not the way to make me feel better, Ron!"

The other boy immediately looked repentant. "...I didn't mean...I'm sure Snape will be fine," he tried to recover. But, despite his words, it was clear that Ron had no expectation that Snape would be fine.

Harry smiled. He realized, with a flash of surprise, that he wasn't really all that worried about Snape's holding the indenture. Harry was

upset that he was indentured to anyone but, if someone had to hold the indenture, he didn't particularly mind that it was Snape.

"I don't think he'll be so bad," Harry assured his friend. Ron looked skeptical but held his tongue. "He apologized for today's class and said he'd watch how he gave instructions in the future."

"He apologized?" asked Ron in shock.

Harry nodded. "Yes. He told me before that he would try not to abuse this situation."

Whatever Ron or Hermione would have said to this was lost in the sudden sound of the afternoon owl delivery. With little warning, hundreds of owls flooded the Great Hall. They collided with each other and dipped dangerously low over the students, who flung up their arms to protect themselves. Some children screamed and hid under the tables.

"What the...?!" yelled Ron.

Harry stood up quickly, his wand already withdrawn. "Protego Maximus!" he yelled and a large bubble formed over the four student tables. The owls shrieked outside the bubbles as they tried to enter and bounced off the invisible barriers.

Harry glanced at the head table. Dumbledore had stood up and was now waving his own wand in the air. Soon, the owls had landed and were lined in orderly rows against the walls of the Great Hall. When order had been restored, Dumbledore nodded to Harry and the boy lowered the barriers he had summoned and sat back down.

Eyeing the owls with concern, the students also sat back down in their seats. The owls hooted from time to time, but they did not try to fly around the room again.

"Boys and girls! Do not be alarmed," calmed Dumbledore. "The owls will not try to hurt you."

“What happened?” called out one of the Hufflepuff students. From the head table, Professor Sprout glared at the boy for speaking out of turn.

“There were just too many owls trying to enter at once,” explained Dumbledore. “I should have foreseen this and made other arrangements for owl delivery today.” He hesitated and then, apparently, deciding that an explanation was due, continued. “This morning’s Daily Prophet informed the wizarding world that Harry Potter had returned to Hogwarts. Apparently, quite a few witches and wizards have written to Harry now that they know he is here.”

Harry blushed. This was due to him?

“It would be helpful if a few of you could help detach the messages from the owls lining the walls. They will then be on their way and Harry can read the messages at his leisure.”

Now that the swarms of owls had been explained, the students no longer were alarmed. They seemed excited about the attention that Harry was receiving and were pleased to help remove the messages from the waiting owls. Dumbledore conjured a small table for the students to place the letters and packages. Soon the table was covered with the offerings.

Harry pretended to be engrossed in his lunch and made no move to approach the owls or to collect the letters stacked on the corner table. “Aren’t you going to read them?” asked Ron eagerly.

Harry shook his head.

“Maybe later,” Hermione suggested quietly.

Harry nodded in relief. He ignored Ron’s look of disappointment. He couldn’t explain in words exactly what he was feeling. He just knew that he was overwhelmed. He desperately wanted quiet. He shoveled a few bits of food into his mouth so that Snape and Dumbledore wouldn’t accuse him of trying to starve himself. Then, putting down his fork, he told his friends that he would see them later.

“Where are you going?” asked Ron in surprise.

“I’m going back to Gryffindor Tower. I’m going to try to get some rest,” Harry explained.

“But we have Charms class,” reminded Hermione.

“Professor Snape said that I could skip whatever class I have after lunch for a few days. I could use the rest.”

Immediately, they looked concerned about his health. “I’m fine!” Harry assured them. “I just need some sleep.” But Harry hadn’t been completely truthful. He wasn’t all that tired. He just needed to find some time to be alone. He longed for some quiet -- away from the constantly staring eyes.

As soon as he rose from the table, the noise level in the Hall dipped again. Ignoring this, and giving the table with the letters and packages a wide berth, Harry left the Great Hall.

Dumbledore watched the boy leave with troubled eyes. “I should have foreseen the fuss with the owls,” he told Snape regretfully. “It was unfortunate. It added unnecessary chaos to his return. He is already struggling to adjust.”

Snape looked sour. “It would help if the students stopped treating him like he was an interesting species of lab animal.”

Dumbledore nodded. “It is understandable that they are somewhat star-struck. But, you are right. He needs things to return to normal.”

Snape snorted. “Only you would think of using the word ‘normal’ when referring to Harry Potter.”

Dumbledore smiled. “All right. Maybe saying ‘return to normal’ is not quite right. Harry has never had a normal life. But, unless I’m much mistaken – and I doubt that I am – a normal life is exactly what Harry craves.”

Harry decided he might as well try to get some rest, since he was skipping class anyway. Entering the Gryffindor common room, he had felt an unexpected sense of homecoming. He climbed the steps to the dormitory room with mounting anticipation. Stepping into the room, he drank in the familiar red and gold trimmings. He lay down on the comfortable bed and let the quiet peace of the empty room seep into his senses and calm him.

As a precaution, the teen cast the muffliato charm around his bed in case he had one of his all-too-common nightmares and woke up yelling. It was a wise precaution. He woke up, bathed in sweat, moaning from the nightmares that had visited him during his short nap.

Shaking off the dull fog that clouded his brain, he left the room, ready to make his way to his next class. He hesitated at the top of the stairs. Voices drifted up from the common room. It sounded as if a large crowd had assembled there. Harry hated the idea of running the gauntlet of more staring eyes. He wondered whether, if he waited a short time, the crowd would dissipate.

He was just deciding to return to his room when he heard his name mentioned. Mentally, he groaned but he was curious enough to try to overhear what was being said. There were numerous people speaking. Harry didn't recognize most of the voices.

"Are you sure this is the right station?"

"I know what I'm doing," came the irritated response. There was the sound of static as someone apparently fiddled with a wireless.

"Hurry! We're going to miss it!"

"I didn't skip Divination, and risk detention, just to listen to static!"

“Don’t worry. The Daily Prophet said it’d be on at 2 pm. It’s not quite that time yet. We haven’t missed anything,” someone assured.

“What do you think they’re going to say about Potter?”

“Probably just more about the fact that Harry’s back at Hogwarts.”

“Did you see him whip out his wand at lunch, when those owls came?” asked a boy excitedly. Although Harry couldn’t see who was speaking, he guessed from the high-pitched voice that it was a first year. “He was faster than Dumbledore!”

“He was awesome,” another boy agreed.

“He grew up expecting to be attacked at any moment. He’s probably always on alert,” responded an older girl.

“Shh! I’ve got it!” Suddenly, the wireless static disappeared and the sound came in clearly. Everyone in the common room settled down to listen.

“Hello, witches and wizards. This is Rita Skeeter, here with an exclusive interview with Minister Scrimgeour, as we promised in today’s Daily Prophet. Thank you, Minister, for taking the time to speak with me.”

“You’re welcome Rita. It’s always a pleasure.”

“We’re meeting, of course, to discuss the situation of Harry Potter. I remind our listeners that Minister Scrimgeour issued the welcome news late last night that Harry Potter was to return to Hogwarts this morning to complete his education.”

“Yes,” confirmed the Minister. “We are thrilled to announce that Harry was released from St. Mungo’s and is already back at school.”

“That’s wonderful. But, was Harry ready to be released from hospital? What about reports that he is very ill?”

“Such reports were grossly exaggerated,” dismissed Scrimgeour. “It’s true that Harry needs some medical treatment. I can’t go into the details, of course – patient confidentiality! But, he’ll be able to receive that treatment while at Hogwarts. We have no doubt that, once back at school, among his friends, Harry will soon be in robust health.”

“Minister,” there was a rustle as Rita apparently leaned toward Scrimgeour to ask her next question. “We are all sadly familiar with Harry’s rejection of the wizarding world following his defeat of You Know Who last spring. We cannot help wondering whether Harry is returning to Hogwarts willingly.”

Scrimgeour spoke in a stern, forceful voice. “Harry Potter belongs to the wizarding world. I have nothing against muggles, of course, but Harry is a wizard! We have a right to insist that he stay here.” Scrimgeour then attempted to lighten the mood. He laughed good-humoredly and said, “Besides, we can’t expect any teenage boy to want to go to school.”

Obediently, Rita laughed with the Minister and said, “Too true!”

The Minister continued. “It’s to be expected that a boy who has done as much as Harry thinks he should be allowed more free rein than a typical teenager. But, the Wizengamot, Headmaster Dumbledore, Healer Moulson, and Harry’s guardian all agreed that Harry would be best served in returning to Hogwarts.”

“His guardian? You can’t mean Harry’s aunt?”

“No, of course not, Rita. She was stripped of that privilege years ago, when we realized how unfit she and her husband were.”

“Then who?”

“The Wizengamot has appointed a new guardian for Harry. We were pleased to be able to appoint one of his favorite teachers, Severus Snape.”

“Snape!” Rita was shocked, but she recovered quickly. She was clearly thrilled with the juicy information she had just been given. “We know that Snape claimed to be a spy against You Know Who. However, many fear that he cleverly played both sides against each other. After all, he was among the Dark Lord’s inner circle. Are you sure that Snape can be trusted? Of all the possible choices, why was he selected as Harry’s guardian?”

Scrimgeour’s tone was disapproving. “Professor Snape fought against You Know Who and we should all respect his bravery.” Scrimgeour let a short pause follow his reprimand. Then, softening his tone, he explained, “Professor Snape was a logical choice, considering that he was a very close friend of Harry’s mother.”

“Really? A close friend, you say?” Harry could almost hear Rita salivating over this information. He clenched his fists. Rita’s tone of voice made everything sound so...dirty.

Scrimgeour’s silence was confirmation enough. Apparently satisfied with the innuendo for now, Rita pursued another line of questioning. “Harry will come of age in about seven months. Do you know what he’s planning to do then? Will he return to the muggle world?”

“We are pleased to be able to tell you that Harry will be staying at Hogwarts to complete his education.” Scrimgeour took a breath, knowing that the next bit of information was going to raise eyebrows. “The Wizengamot, after grave deliberation, invoked an old spell and placed Harry under an indenture that will take him through the end of his formal education. This will also ensure that Harry receives his medical treatment.”

There was a slight pause. “Do I understand correctly? Harry Potter is indentured? As a servant?” There was a note of disbelief in the question.

“No! Not as a servant!” Scrimgeour protested. Choosing his words carefully, he continued. “I know I speak for the wizarding world when I say that we owe that boy a debt of gratitude that we can never repay. The least we can do is ensure that Harry receives the best medical

treatment that we can provide and that he completes his studies, as James and Lily Potter would have wished for their child. We need to help him learn his rightful place in our world. After all, he is the last of the Potter line, and heir to the Black fortune through his godfather Sirius Black. I don't think anyone would hesitate to do what is in Harry's best interests, do you?"

"Well, of course not. But, was this really necessary?"

"The Wizengamot agreed that it was."

"This is the most unusual situation I have ever heard of!"

"Harry Potter is an unusual boy," responded Scrimgeour. "But, he's already settled back at school and this indenture is just a ... technicality."

"Minister, when will we be able to see him and speak with Harry? He has many admiring fans. Surely, you didn't retrieve Harry from the muggle world just to hide him away at Hogwarts indefinitely?"

"Hah, hah, Rita! You just want to be able to interview the boy!" Scrimgeour accused playfully.

"Can you blame me?" asked the reporter, bantering. "He would be the interview of a career. There are so many questions that I want to ask him. My readers (and listeners) deserve to know."

"I can't promise a one-on-one, Rita, but I can tell you that Harry won't be hidden away at Hogwarts. He'll be attending public functions as appropriate, and as his school schedule permits."

"You'll let us know, won't you? Now, I close this broadcast with a message to Harry Potter, if he's listening. Welcome back home, Harry! We're here for you!"

With this, someone turned off the wireless. Harry pressed himself against the side of the wall. He let the cool stone soothe his fevered body. It was humiliating to be discussed in such a public manner. It

was an added insult that Rita Skeeter, who had fed the fire of hatred toward “Mark Twist” and who had been instrumental in stirring up anti-muggle sentiment even before Voldemort had risen again, would act the part of a concerned citizen worried about Harry Potter’s health and wellbeing. Harry swore to himself that he would never give Rita an interview. He would rather see her drowned in a sea of her own poisonous ink.

Rustling resumed in the common room and students all began talking at once. Harry caught some of the conversations.

“I can’t believe they forced him to come back!”

“Why didn’t they leave him alone?!”

“Don’t be stupid, Sharon. The Ministry’s not going to let Harry Potter wander around unprotected. Who knows how many Death Eaters may be out there still, looking to kill him.”

“He can take care of himself!”

“Without a wand? Remember he didn’t have one when he left us. He was only given a new wand when he came back.”

“But to force him to return?”

“Can you believe they let Snape hold his indenture?”

“Poor Harry!”

“No way Snape is Harry’s favorite teacher. That was a lie!”

“If Snape mistreats him, I’ll kill that evil git!”

“I don’t think Snape would dare. Dumbledore will keep an eye on him.”

“What do you suppose this medical treatment is?”

“Oh, it’s probably some foul-tasting vitamin drink or something Harry doesn’t want to take. You heard that he was supposedly suffering from malnutrition when they found him. He sure looks like he could use a few good meals.”

“I’m glad he’s back! He shouldn’t have left us in the first place!”

“Who can blame him, though? They sent him to Azkaban, for Merlin’s sake!”

“I don’t blame him! I’m just saying...”

“I agree! It’s like when I’m angry at my parents and I storm off to my room. It’s okay for a little while, but then I have to come back out and join my family again.”

“Harry doesn’t feel like we are his family,” said a voice sadly.

“Then, we have to change his opinion. Scrimgeour was right. Harry belongs here. It’s just too bad that they had to force him.”

“Harry’s so powerful that the Wizengamot has to do a spell to make him listen.” Harry heard the note of hero-worship in the voice; it sounded like the same high-pitched voice that had been impressed with Harry’s reaction to the owls at lunchtime. It was clear that the younger boy viewed Harry’s indenture as a mark of Harry’s power, not powerlessness. Harry was struck by this reasoning.

“Damn! Look at the time!”

Harry heard the sounds of people scrambling to leave. In a short time, the flurry of activity died down as the common room emptied of students.

Harry slowly finished descending the stairs. He was surprised. He had thought that people would treat him with contempt once they learned of the indenture. But, the others kids sympathized or – what a

completely bizarre twist! -- been impressed by it. Either way, it was ...nice... to have the support of his fellow Gryffindors.

Walking across the grounds, on his way to Herbology, Harry heard someone call his name loudly. "Harry! Harry!" He turned to see Hagrid hailing him. Harry's heart lifted at seeing the big man striding toward him. Hagrid had a huge grin on his face.

Reaching Harry, Hagrid held out his hand. Harry's hand was swallowed in Hagrid's and it was pumped up and down vigorously. "I jus' heard ye were back! I've been in the forest fer the last few days. It's great to see ye!"

Harry smiled and said, "It's good to see you too, Hagrid."

"I've been wantin' to tell ye for a long time now, ever since we found out ye were Harry Potter and not Mark Twist, that I knew yer folks. Grand people, they were. They'd been right proud of ye, Harry, an' no mistake!"

"Thanks, Hagrid."

"To me everlastin' shame, I was the one who brought to yer relatives, when ye were jus' a wee babe. Yer parents had been killed by You Know Who and Dumbledore had me fetch ye from yer house. I jus' want ye to know, Harry, I would never have left ye with those bloody muggles if I had known how they would treat ye!" Hagrid started to sob. Fat tears rolled down his cheeks.

"It's not your fault, Hagrid." Harry wasn't sure how to comfort the big man.

"I know ye blame Dumbledore, Harry," said Hagrid. He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped at his face. "But Dumbledore didn't know that they would abuse ye. He was heartsick when we learned that ye had been mistreated. Dumbledore's a good man, Harry. A great man."

Harry didn't want to argue with Hagrid. "That's in the past, Hagrid."

Hagrid looked like he wanted to say more but, reluctantly, changed the subject. "I got good news for ye, Harry! I've been taking care of Hedwig for ye."

"What?!" Harry had wondered what had happened to his owl when he had been sent to Azkaban. He assumed that she had been given to another family. "You mean you have her? Is she okay?"

Hagrid nodded his bushy head, smiling. "Yeah. She'll be excited to see ye, I know. I'll bring her by tomorrow, okay?"

"That will be great, Hagrid. Thank you so much!"

"Yer welcome, Harry."

"I better get going to Herbology. I'll be late."

"Okay, Harry. But, you have to promise to have tea with me the first chance ye get!"

Harry smiled again. "Sure, Hagrid. I'm looking forward to it." Waving goodbye, Harry continued to the greenhouse where class would be held.

He was only a few steps from the entrance of the greenhouse when Ron and Hermione dashed around the corner. It was clear that they had been running to get to class but, when they saw Harry, they stopped abruptly.

"Hi! You're cutting it close," commented Harry. "How come you're so late?" he asked.

Ron blushed and looked guilty. Hermione hesitated and then, took a deep breath and admitted, "Actually, Harry, when you left the Great Hall at lunch, we finished untying all the messages from the owls. Some of the letters were for other people, of course, and some of the

students, like me, have subscriptions to the Daily Prophet. There was an article about you, of course, and they read it aloud. The Daily Prophet announced that you had returned to Hogwarts and mentioned that Rita Skeeter was planning an interview with Minister Scrimgeour this afternoon to discuss you further. Terry Boot – you remember him, Harry?; he’s a Ravenclaw – had a wireless that he set up in one of the empty classrooms so that we could listen to the interview along with a bunch of others.”

Ron added, “There were about 30 of us. We all skipped our 2 o’clock classes to listen to what Scrimgeour had to say.”

Harry scowled and Ron and Hermione exchanged glances, clearly worried about Harry’s reaction to this news. Then, Hermione asked tentatively, “Would you like us to tell you what Scrimgeour said?”

Harry shook his head. “I already know what he said. I heard the interview too.”

“What?!” asked Ron in surprise. “Where? How?”

“Someone set up a wireless in the Gryffindor common room. A group of kids listened to it. They didn’t know I could overhear.”

“Oh,” said Hermione. She was quiet for a moment as she processed this information. Then she asked, “Well, what did you think?”

Harry’s scowl deepened. “I think that the Ministry is as big a bunch of liars as ever. Pretending that Snape is my favorite teacher. Acting as if my not wanting to return to Hogwarts is some ...teenage rebellion. Sugar-coating the indenture. They had no right to bring me back here.” Harry shook his head in disgust.

Just then, another group of students rounded the corner of the greenhouse, out of breath from running. They also stopped when they saw Harry. An awkward silence filled the air. Realizing that these students were late because they also were coming from having listened to the interview, Harry rolled his eyes and muttered, “Did the whole school listen to this interview?”

Apparently not realizing that the question was rhetorical, Ron nodded and answered seriously. "I would be surprised if anyone missed it."

Harry made a sound of disgust in his throat and stomped through the door of the greenhouse to take his place at one of the tables. Once again, all heads swiveled to watch him as he sat down. Ron, Hermione, and the other students who had arrived late, trailed in after Harry.

Professor Sprout did not comment on their tardiness. Instead, clearing her throat to regain the class' attention, she continued the lesson, which had only just begun anyway.

Harry entered the Great Hall for dinner with Ron, Hermione, and a few other students. Even though heads turned, it was easier for Harry to ignore since he wasn't alone. Harry knew that many of the students were looking at him to see if his indenture was somehow visible. Recalling the view of the young Gryffindor, that Harry's indenture was evidence that he was a powerful wizard, Harry refused to shrink from the stares. He threw back his shoulders and walked proudly toward the Gryffindor table.

He ate a few bites, but found the eyes boring into his back distracting. Half-way through his meal, he put down his fork and turned around to sweep his eyes over the Great Hall. As he suspected! Many people had been staring at him, but a few dropped their eyes guiltily when Harry turned around.

Without stopping to think, but feeling like he had reached the end of his patience, Harry stood up. "Where are you going?" asked Ron startled.

Harry didn't answer. He strode to the front of the room and turned to face the house tables. The staff table was behind him. All eyes were now firmly on him, and the noise in the Great Hall ceased. "All right, already!" Harry called. "Take a good look at me now, because I want the staring to stop! It's driving me crazy!"

Behind him, Harry thought he heard a snort. He wondered what teacher had made the sound. But, he couldn't turn around to look. He continued to face the other students and he threw his arms out wide. "Yes, I'm back! Yes, I'm Harry Potter! Yes, I'm here under protest and under an indenture to Professor Snape! Now, stop the staring!"

And, with that, he went back to the table and slid in beside Ron again. Ron tried to hide the fact that he was smiling behind his hand.

"What?" demanded Harry.

Ron lowered his hand and let his smile shine. "I don't think that your speech is going to stop people from staring."

Harry looked around and saw that, indeed, Ron was right. If anything, even more eyes were looking his way. Harry groaned and grabbed his hair with his hands.

Hermione laughed and said, "Don't worry, Harry. It will die down in a few days. Just ignore it for now."

"I'm going to jinx the next person who looks at me!" Harry warned.

Ron and Hermione burst out laughing.

Ginny's soft voice interrupted. "Don't be angry, Harry. They're all just interested in you."

Harry's eyes softened when he looked at Ginny. He usually avoided looking in her direction because she made him feel a bit nervous. "I'm not sure I like being so famous."

She smiled at him, and Harry felt his stomach clench. "You shouldn't have saved our world then." Her eyes glowed a little.

Harry felt his cheeks redden. "I...I..."

Ginny waited patiently for him to finish his sentence. Harry took a breath and admitted, "I was born to kill Voldemort."

Ginny sucked in her breath at the mention of the name. But, she maintained eye contact with Harry and smiled gravely. "I know. You are the hero."

Harry's face flamed. He remembered that, during his battle with Voldemort, he had claimed to be the hero. Now, Ginny was using the same words. Was she remembering what he had said? Did she think he had been arrogant?

Seeming to read his mind, Ginny leaned forward and said, her voice slightly deepened, "You are the hero." She leaned back again and, in a normal tone, said, "That's why we all stare."

Harry didn't know what to say or where to look. His heart beat uncomfortably against his chest and his palms felt sweaty. He was grateful when Hermione made a comment about the Charms class they had all missed. He suspected that Hermione had deliberately changed the subject and he was glad. It gave him an excuse to look away from Ginny. It took a few minutes, but his heartbeat returned to normal and he felt his flushed face cool.

Every so often throughout the rest of the dinner, Harry would glance at Ginny. He thought it ironic that, while other students were sneaking looks at him, he was sneaking looks at Ginny Weasley.

Chapter Twenty Nine – Year Six; Professor Snape Front and Center

Harry relaxed in the Gryffindor common room after dinner. A few of his fellow Gryffindors became more relaxed (or braver) and approached the teen. Showing a tact he would not have guessed they possessed, no one asked him about his past. Rather, they spoke generally about the teachers and classes and clued Harry in on some gossip, such as which students were seen snogging in the hallway.

Harry was just learning from Ron that Fred and George were trying to raise money to start a joke shop in Diagon Alley when he felt a pull at his consciousness. It was as if he had a sudden recollection that he had forgotten to do something. Then, slowly, as if gathering momentum, the vague thought crystallized into a distinct urge to go to Professor Snape's office. Harry was standing before he had realized he meant to do so.

Ron stopped speaking in mid-sentence and looked in surprise at Harry. "What's the matter?" he asked.

"I've got to go to Professor Snape's office," said Harry mechanically.

"Why?" asked Ron in confusion.

"I've...I've got to go," said Harry, already starting toward the portrait hole.

Ron stood up and followed Harry to the exit. "Harry, did you forget something in his office or something? Why do you have to go to his office all of a sudden?"

Harry continued walking as he explained. "I have to be at his office every night at 8 o'clock. I've got to go."

Sudden understanding dawned on Ron's face. "It's the indenture, isn't it?" he whispered. It was as if he felt that whispering the words made the fact of the indenture less appalling to Harry.

Harry nodded jerkily.

Ron continued following Harry down the corridor. He was unsure what to do. "Do you want me to come with you?" he asked awkwardly.

"There's no need," said Harry. "I'll be there an hour." As he said these words, his stomach clenched.

Curious, Ron asked, "Why?"

"You know! It's so that he can go inside my thoughts. It's why they put me under the indenture."

"Oh," muttered Ron. It was a chance remark of his (that it was too bad Harry wasn't a house elf) that had led to Dumbledore's hitting upon the idea of the indenture. Ron sincerely hoped that Hermione would never mention this to Harry.

They walked together in silence for a while. Then, Ron asked, "Does it hurt? When he's inside your head?"

Harry gave a short nod. "A lot."

"It'll make you better, though, right?" asked Ron, hoping for reassurance.

Harry snorted. "That's what they say. I should have been consulted!"

They had arrived at Snape's office. Harry knocked and was bid to enter. Professor Snape was waiting for him. He looked in surprise at seeing Ron. "Were you invited, Mr. Weasley?" he asked in a biting tone.

Ron turned red but kept his voice even as he said, "No, Professor. I don't mean to intrude. I just wanted to ask if there's anything I can do to help."

Mollified by the boy's respectful tone, Snape considered the offer. After a short pause, he said, "Actually, Mr. Weasley, you can be of

assistance. Please return here in one hour. You can accompany Mr. Potter back to his dormitory room.”

Ron looked alarmed. “He’ll need help?” He cast a swift look at Harry, who had said nothing but was looking a little pale and was staring steadily at Snape.

“He may be a little weak,” Snape said. “Now, I suggest you leave and close the door behind you.” There was no mistaking the command. Ron, feeling as if he were abandoning Harry, left the room.

Snape motioned for Harry to approach the small bed he had conjured in the corner of the room. Harry walked toward the bed and said bitterly, “Just another fun event in this never-ending day.” The teen lay down on the bed and clenched his fists in anticipation.

Snape sat in a chair he had situated at the bedside. “Try to relax, Potter,” he said. His tone was not unkind.

Harry unclenched his fists. But, he did not feel the peace that had flowed through him the last time (was it just yesterday?) that Snape and the others had entered his mind. “I don’t feel relaxed,” he said in surprise.

Snape snorted impatiently. “I can’t order you to relax, Potter. The indenture is not the same as the poppyweed potion. The indenture means that you have to do tasks I tell you to do – such as open your mind. But, I can’t make you feel any particular feeling.”

“Oh,” said Harry. He was pleased to find out that there were limits to the indenture. He took deep breaths and forced himself to relax slightly.

“I’m going to cast a body bind curse on you, so that you won’t hurt yourself when I’m in your thoughts.”

The idea of being unable to move was petrifying. “Please don’t, sir. I’ll stay still,” he promised.

“You know it will hurt.”

“Yes. But I promise not to move.”

“Okay, then.” Casting a muffliato charm on the room, Snape took a deep breath himself and said, “Legilimens!”

Immediately, Harry felt a presence at the wall blocking entrance to his mind. Snape turned the handle of the door that Harry had placed in the wall the day before. The door swung open and Snape entered.

Once again, Snape did not explore. He stopped at the first room he passed. He approached a section of a wall that had a thin dark smear of the tar-like substance running down it in rivulets. Starting at the top of the streak, Snape began scraping away at the blot.

Harry shifted on the bed and tried to stifle his groans.

Working steadily through the next hour, Snape pulled the dirty streak away from the wall. Like the memory he had lifted the day before, when the blot was pulled away, it left behind a shadow on the wall.

When he was done and the streak hovered a few inches away from the wall, Snape prodded the memory with his wand. This time, the scene was one Snape had witnessed himself on numerous occasions. The Dark Lord was punishing one of the Death Eaters for some perceived fault. The difference with Harry’s memory, though, was that Harry had watched the Dark Lord performing the Cruciatus Curse from the point of view of Voldemort himself. As with so many of Harry’s memories, it was seared into Harry’s consciousness as if he had done the act rather than just having witnessed the event.

Snape left the room and exited from Harry’s mind through the door in the wall. The potions master was exhausted. This was extremely tiring work. He stood up and stretched his weary bones. He cast a concerned look at the boy.

Harry’s eyes were closed and he was panting as he tried to gather up his strength.

“Are you alright?” Snape was surprised to hear himself ask the question. There was something about the quiet dignity of the boy that struck him.

Harry drew a shaky breath and opened his eyes. They were glittering with pain. He swung his legs over the side of the bed. “Yes,” he said in a low voice.

The green eyes remembered Snape, once again, of Lily. And, once again, it made him try to reach out to her son. “The Dark Lord was more erratic and more cruel than even Death Eaters realized when they first were drawn to him. It was hard to witness some of his brutal actions. I...I can only imagine how difficult it would be to feel those actions.”

Harry drew a deep breath. Snape continued, “You are angry that you were forced to return to this world.”

Harry looked up with narrowed eyes. Yes! He was angry!

“The wizarding world is less subtle than the muggle world, Potter. The teachings of Gryffindor – known for acting without thinking – are embraced more than the teachings of Slytherin. They should have approached you with more cunning...luring you back here instead of grabbing you.”

“They should have left me the hell alone!” objected Harry.

“Really? Do you believe that, Potter? Do you really want these memories to continue to haunt you?”

Harry shook his head. But, then burst out, “I want to have the freedom to decide my own life!”

“The indenture does not last forever.” There was a knock at the door. Snape hesitated, wanting to say more.

When Ron entered, Harry stood up. He swayed on his feet and his friend rushed to his side to throw a supportive arm around his shoulders. Harry rested briefly on Ron's strength and then stood straighter, giving a short nod to indicate that he was ready to stand on his own. Looking concerned but not saying a word, Ron followed Harry across the room to the door, keeping close in case Harry lost his balance again.

Snape watched, his jaw clenched, as Harry staggered to the door, refusing Ron's assistance. "Same time tomorrow night, Potter."

"Yes, sir," Harry said expressionlessly. He and Ron left the room.

The boys did not speak as they made their way back to Gryffindor Tower. Ron silently helped Harry over the portrait hole entrance. There were still a number of students in the common room when they entered and they called out cheerful greetings to Ron and Harry when they entered. They fell silent when they realized that Harry seemed ill. Behind Harry's back, Ron shook his head to forestall any questions. The students watched without a word as Harry climbed the steps to his dormitory and disappeared from sight, Ron still trailing behind him.

Thomas, a first year student, turned to face his friends and said, his voice fierce, "Did you see him? Did you see how sick he looked? What did Professor Snape do to him?"

Emily, another first year, responded, "You know that Harry's under an indenture. Maybe Snape made him do something awful."

"Maybe Snape beat him!"

"Don't be stupid. Snape isn't going to beat Harry. Dumbledore wouldn't stand for it. And why would Snape want to beat Harry anyway?" asked another student, Daniel.

Thomas responded, "Maybe Snape really is a Death Eater after all. He was clever enough to trick everyone, even Dumbledore. Now, he's got Harry in his clutches and he's doing something to him. You can see that."

“What do we do?” Emily whispered.

“What do you mean?” asked another girl, in a scared voice.

“Sharon, we can’t just let Snape get away with hurting Harry,” Emily said fiercely.

“Emily’s right,” agreed Thomas. “We got to do something.”

“But what?” asked Daniel.

“We’ve got to come up with a plan that will make Snape realize that he better treat Harry decently or he’ll live to regret it!” responded the other boy.

Sharon cast a glance at the empty stairs, where Harry had stood just a few minutes ago. “You’re right,” she said, although her voice still shook. “Harry risked everything to save us from You Know Who. We can’t stand back and let Snape hurt him.”

And the little band of four spent the rest of the evening trying to think up a way to teach Professor Snape a lesson he would not forget.

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The next day was a pale repeat of the day before. People continued to stare at Harry but not quite as much as on his first day back. A few students even dared to approach Harry in class and exchange ordinary conversation with him. The classes were generally boring to Harry, but he was glad not to have to work too hard anyway. He still felt extremely drained from his session with Snape the night before.

Harry found his stomach turning in knots in the hour before he had to go to Snape’s office again. Once again, he was in the Gryffindor common room, trying to relax after dinner. However, as the time approached for him to go to Snape, he found himself fidgeting and getting nervous. He didn’t pay much attention to the group of first years who were watching him. Finally, when he could delay no longer,

he stood up to leave the room. Ron said softly, "I'll see you in an hour then." Harry gave a jerky nod and left the room.

When Harry returned, with Ron once more hovering protectively around him, the little group of first years watched with narrowed eyes. As soon as Harry disappeared from view up to his dormitory, they bent their heads together and whispered excitedly.

When they broke apart, Thomas said, "Until tomorrow, then."

The others nodded, and Daniel repeated in a firm voice, "Tomorrow."

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The next day was Saturday.

"Wake up, Harry!"

Harry opened his bleary eyes to see Ron peering down excitedly. "What?" he asked groggily. His sleep, as always, had been disturbed by nightmares. "Isn't it Saturday? Can't we sleep in?"

Ron pushed at Harry to wake him up quicker. "Harry! Get up! Yes, it's Saturday. And, I can't wait to play Quidditch with you. I've reserved the pitch. Now that you don't have to worry about studying to kill You Know Who or avoiding attention, or whatever other reason you had for not playing, you can really let loose. I can't wait to see what you've got!"

Harry felt a stirring of excitement himself. Ron was right. For the first time, he could really enjoy himself. He dressed hurriedly and shoveled in a few mouthfuls of breakfast.

"You two seem in a rush," commented Hermione.

"We're going to play Quidditch," explained Ron.

Overhearing, a few of their friends begged to watch or join in. Ron was happy to include more.

“Are you interested in making it a real game, Weasley, or are you too scared?” drawled a familiar voice.

Ron turned to see Draco, giving him a smirk. Ron could tell from Draco’s tone of voice, if not from the words themselves, that Draco was trying for some friendly rivalry, rather than a fight. Responding in the same vein, he replied, “Oh, I think we’re up for real game, don’t you, Harry?”

Harry agreed, “Sure!” His excitement rose higher. He couldn’t wait.

Draco’s smirk grew. “Why not make this more interesting? Why not have an...incentive...to win?”

“You mean a bet,” asked Ron doubtfully.

“Not money, Weasel,” said Draco. His tone of voice had softened and Ron didn’t flare up at the nickname. “Let’s say that the team that loses has to do one thing that the player in their position on the other team wants them to do.”

“No way!” said Ron. “I don’t trust you and your friends!”

“Oh, you already admit we’re going to win?”

“That’s not what I meant!”

Draco laughed. “Okay. A few ground rules then. Nothing too gross, awful or embarrassing.”

Ron looked unsure but Harry nodded. “Don’t worry, Ron,” said Harry. “We’re going to win!”

Hermione piped up. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

That seemed to decide Ron. “Okay, Malfoy, it’s a deal.” And he shook Draco’s hand.

“See you at the pitch!” said Draco, as he turned away looking very pleased.

Harry and Ron hurried from the room, followed now by an ever growing number of students who had heard the challenge.

Ron and Draco quickly pulled together two teams. On Ron’s team, Harry was Seeker, Ron was Keeper, with Dean and Ginny playing Chasers and two other students who Harry didn’t know playing Beaters. Draco was Seeker on his own team. Harry wondered briefly what he would ask Draco to do for him when Ron’s team won the game, as he was determined that they would. Harry knew a few of the players on Draco’s team but some were younger and he didn’t recognize them.

Harry could barely contain his joy at being on a broom again. Although it had been years since he had last flown on a broom, it felt as if it were yesterday. He soared through the air, enjoying the rush of the wind. He only wished that the broom were capable of faster speeds. He dived and twisted for the sheer pleasure of it. The other students pointed at him, impressed by his flying skill. For the first time in years, Harry felt happy. He wished he could fly forever.

Unfortunately, Ron was hit by a bludger midway through the game and, too injured to keep playing, had to take himself out. In order not to forfeit the game, Ron selected another player to be Keeper in his place. Not as skilled as Ron, the new boy was not able to keep Draco’s team from scoring. The score in favor of Draco’s team crept dangerously high and Harry knew that he’d have to catch the snitch quickly. When the score was 190 to 40, Harry spotted the snitch. Harry dove with reckless abandon to reach it before Draco. If he ended the game now, at least the teams would be tied. As his fingers closed on the snitch, he heard the commentator yell that Draco’s team had scored again. It was too late to release the snitch. The game was over. Draco’s team had won.

Landing slowly, he walked over to where the teams were huddled together. “Good catch, Potter,” said Draco. He could afford to be generous. His team had won.

Ron's team looked glum. Some of Draco's players were already assigning tasks to their counterparts on Ron's team. Ginny started to cluck like a chicken and hop on one foot. Her face turned red as everyone laughed. Harry tried to hide his own smile. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He turned to see Draco smiling at him, eyes glittering.

"I think I'm going to have to think about what I want you to do, Potter," drawled Draco.

Until that moment, Harry hadn't thought about what would happen if Ron's team had lost. He had been so sure that he could catch the snitch before anyone else and win the game. Damn! He looked uncertainly at Draco, wondering what the other boy would demand.

Seeing his worried look, Draco just smirked more. "Oh, don't worry, Potter. We agreed that it wouldn't be too terrible. But, I don't think I want to waste this opportunity by having you cluck like a chicken and hop on one foot," he inclined his head toward Ginny.

"I'm sorry, Harry," said Ron. He had just finished having to stand on his head. "I got you into this."

"I agreed, Ron," said Harry. "It's not your fault."

He watched with worried eyes as Draco led his team off the pitch.

As he left the pitch with his own team, he noticed that Professors Snape and McGonagall were watching. He had not realized that they were among the spectators. McGonagall beckoned and he drew nearer.

"Is it too much to hope that you'll join the Gryffindor team this year, Potter?" she asked hopefully.

"Er..." said Harry. He wasn't sure he was up for that yet. "Maybe next year?" he offered.

“Give it a rest, Minerva,” said Snape, sourly. “Potter has enough to deal with this year.” She looked disappointed but didn’t press the issue.

“Potter,” drawled Snape.

“Sir?”

“You enjoy Quidditch. In a few weeks, the Ballycastle Bats are playing the Montrose Magpies. Would you like to attend the game with a few of your friends?”

Harry goggled. “For real?”

Snape permitted a tiny smile to touch the corners of his mouth. “The headmaster believes that it would do you good to enjoy yourself some more. He suggested that you might wish to attend the event. I have been requested to chaperone.”

“That would be...,” Harry gasped. He couldn’t find the words and he trailed off. Never in his life had he gone to anything like it. The Dursleys would not have dreamed of taking him to a circus, amusement park or – best of all – a sporting event. It would be too wonderful.

“Your friends are waiting for you Potter,” said McGonagall kindly. Harry turned and saw that a handful of his friends were looking his way, waiting for him before going inside.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. “Goodbye, Professors.” He turned and hurried over to Ron. He couldn’t wait to tell Ron the good news about going to a professional Quidditch match but he didn’t want to mention it in front of the others, since they couldn’t all come with him. He decided to wait until he was alone with Ron to say anything.

Entering the castle, Harry noticed a group of first year Gryffindors hanging around the entrance. They looked alarmed to see him and Harry was surprised. True, he had never spoken with them, but they hadn’t seemed scared of him before. He was wondering whether he

should approach them and try to calm whatever fears they might have when Professors McGonagall and Snape entered the castle. They had been only a few minutes behind Harry and his friends.

Immediately, there was a loud clanging noise as a bucket came flying through the air. It headed straight toward Snape who, with quick reflexes, drew out his wand and cast a spell to deflect the bucket. The bucket smashed into a suit of armor standing against the wall. The bucket spilled its contents of stinksap on the armor and a rotting stench filled the air.

The falling bucket hit into the armor's shield, causing the shield to fall. In falling, the shield hit the end of the javelin that the knight was holding, causing the lance to shoot from the armor as if thrown.

The javelin flew through the air at lightning speed. It struck Snape squarely in the middle, piercing his stomach. The force of the assault threw him backwards and he landed on his back on the stone floor, pinned to the ground by the point of the lance which had exited his back.

This domino effect couldn't have happened on purpose if they had planned it for months. It all happened in the blink of an eye. Harry was kneeling at Snape's side before the other students had time to scream and shout.

"Professor!" called Harry.

"Severus!" shouted McGonagall, also kneeling beside the stricken man.

Snape did not respond to either. His eyes were half-closed and his breathing was shallow. There was surprisingly little blood as the spear was still nestled snugly in the man's body. His skin was cold to the touch. His eyes started to roll back in his head. It was clear he was moments away from dying.

Harry grabbed his wand and laid it horizontally across Snape's chest, just above where the lance was sticking out of the man's body. He

then laid both of his hands, palms open, on top of his wand and closed his eyes. Digging deep inside, he found his magical core. Remembering the spell he had learned from Voldemort, Harry whispered a series of incantations under his breath.

His wand began to become hot to the touch, but Harry did not remove his hands. Snape's skin beneath the wand glowed as if a light were shining from beneath. Soon, the wand began to glow red from the heat, but Harry didn't notice, as he kept his eyes closed.

Suddenly, Harry's eyes snapped open and he demanded, "Who did this?" There was silence. Again, this time with increasing urgency, he demanded, "Do you want him to die? I can save him. Who did this?"

Four very pale first year students stepped forward. They were shaking and one of the girls was crying. "We didn't mean for him to get hurt," said one of the boys.

"Do you trust me?" asked Harry.

The boy nodded, surprised at the question. Keeping his hands on top of his wand, Harry turned to Professor McGonagall. "Can you conjure a knife, Professor?"

McGonagall looked frightened, but she obediently conjured a knife in midair.

Harry turned back to the boy and asked, "What's your name?"

"Thomas," muttered the boy, his eyes fixated on the knife.

"Thomas. Please, if you want to help me to save his life, take that knife and cut your hand. Place a few drops of your blood in his mouth."

Thomas turned pale. "That's dark magic," he whispered.

Harry's eyes gleamed and he stared steadily at the other boy. "Yes," he admitted. "It's dark magic. But, we're going to use it for good."

Thomas hesitated.

Harry felt the warm glow of his wand start to fade. "Please, Thomas. I cannot hold him here much longer. To work, the spell requires the blood of the person who tried to harm him. Please!"

Looking completely petrified, the boy reached for the knife and drew it across the palm of his hand. He then placed his palm against Snape's lips and a few drops of blood trickled into Snape's mouth.

Harry closed his eyes again and muttered some more. His wand burned hotter and he felt Snape's body shudder.

He heard a commotion and opened his eyes to see Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey hurrying toward them. McGonagall drew away so that Madam Pomfrey could take her place at Snape's side.

"Oh, Merlin!" cried the school nurse.

"Can you save him, Poppy?" demanded Dumbledore.

"I don't know. If we remove the spear, we will cause even more damage. And, he'll bleed to death."

"I can stop the bleeding, Poppy," said Dumbledore.

"Remove the spear," ordered Harry. "I will keep him alive while you repair him." His voice rang with confidence.

Madam Pomfrey looked at Dumbledore, unsure, but the headmaster nodded. Dumbledore waved his wand over Snape and the spear withdrew from Snape's body, leaving a gaping hole behind. No blood gushed out as the headmaster murmured a charm to freeze the blood in place. Quickly, Madam Pomfrey worked to repair the hole and, little by little, it began to close.

Snape's body twitched but Harry closed his eyes again and pressed his wand harder into Snape's body, a few inches above where the

wound gaped. Harry felt a cold chill on the back of his neck. It felt like Death was hovering over his shoulder. Ignoring it, Harry tried to recall the remaining steps of the spell he had stolen from Voldemort's thoughts all those months ago, when he had been living in the Dark Lord's mind. He stopped short of completing the spell as his goal was not to reanimate a dead body to create an Inferi, as was the purpose of the original spell, nor to regain a corporeal existence as Voldemort had done when he used a modified version of this spell during his rebirthing ceremony.

Holding Snape's soul in place, he felt as if he were playing the muggle game of tug of war. Death was invisibly pulling at the other end of the rope. Harry focused his energy on pulling Snape's soul back from the edge of death. He could focus on only this battle. The sounds of the Hall faded away. He was no longer aware of what Dumbledore, Madam Pomfrey, the other students, or Snape himself, was doing. He was only aware of the back and forth tug to take possession of Snape's soul.

After some time – and he couldn't have said if it were minutes or hours – Harry felt the tug on the other end of Snape's soul ease and then stop. Knowing that the battle was over, Harry opened his eyes and looked around. The hole in Snape's body had been sealed. The Professor was still unconscious but his breathing was even and his skin was warm to the touch.

Harry withdrew his hands from on top of Snape's body. "You saved his life, Potter," whispered Madam Pomfrey. "There's no way he should have lived through that."

Dumbledore gazed at Harry with a fierce glow in his eyes. "I do not think anyone else would have thought of... much less been able to use... that spell to save a man's life, Harry. Severus would have died if you hadn't been here."

Harry looked around, ignoring the scores of students who were silently watching. His gaze scanned the Hall until it pinned the group of first years who had caused this crisis. They were watching, huddled together, wide-eyed and pale. Slowly, Harry stood and, swaying with fatigue, staggered slightly as he approached the

youngsters. Before Harry could say a word, one of the girls burst out, "We didn't mean to hurt him!" The others in her group shook their heads vehemently, in agreement. "We're sorry! We're so sorry! We just wanted to punish him for hurting you!"

Whatever Harry had been going to say was forgotten in the surprise over that statement. "What?" he asked confused.

The second boy in the little band stepped forward. "We know that he hurt you every night. You'd come back pale and weak. In pain. We just wanted to punish him. To show him that he couldn't get away with doing that to you."

Harry didn't know what to say. He was floored that these children had almost killed Snape in a mistaken plan to avenge him. Harry stared at them blankly. The idea that anyone would try to protect him was an alien thought.

He had long known that he could trust no one in this world (not even his friends really). And, remembering how he had been treated as Mark Twist, Harry was particularly distrustful of the students at Hogwarts. But, as furious as he was over the wizarding world's insistence that he return to their world, it had been incredibly lonely in the muggle world. He was learning to reconcile his disappointment over the basic nature of people with his need for friendship. (He could hardly get over that he was becoming friends with Draco Malfoy.)

It was completely unexpected to find that these young children had cast themselves in the role of protecting him. No one had ever tried to protect him before. In fact, the opposite had been true. Adults who should have been his natural protectors, such as his aunt and uncle and Dumbledore, had either abused him or stood aside while he was being abused.

Harry felt a warmth uncurl in his stomach. Considering that Professor Snape was still lying on the cold floor, he knew that this feeling was completely inappropriate. But, he couldn't help it. These scared, misguided children had tried to help Harry. A lump rose in his throat.

In the background, Harry was aware that Madam Pomfrey was levitating Snape and transporting him off to the hospital wing. Dumbledore approached and placed a hand on Harry's shoulder. The headmaster turned grave eyes on the four children, who stood shaking, awaiting their punishment.

"What you did here was very serious indeed," began Dumbledore. "You almost killed a man. This cannot go unpunished."

The children looked like they would faint.

"Harry will decide what is to be done with you."

"What?!" burst out Harry.

Dumbledore's hand tightened on the boy's shoulder and then lifted. "If I understand what has occurred, these children thought they were avenging you. It is only because of your skill as a wizard and your unorthodox training in the dark arts that Professor Snape is not dead. I think it only fitting for you to decide the punishment."

Four sets of beseeching eyes turned on Harry.

Harry spluttered. "I...I don't know what to do..."

Dumbledore stared at him steadily and waited for Harry to pronounce judgment.

Harry thought hard. What would be a just sentence? Taking a deep breath, he said, "Well, to start, you four can clean up the stinksap. Without magic!"

They four exchanged looks, filled with dawning hope. Did this mean that they weren't going to be expelled? They eagerly nodded their heads at Harry and waited for him to continue.

Harry looked over to where Hermione and Ron were standing silently in the corner watching him. He wished he could ask them for advice. He tried to imagine what they might suggest.

“Er...you’ll have to do a detention with Professor Snape when he’s well enough.” The four looked frightened at the prospect, but nodded their heads again. “And, you have to each write a three foot essay on the dangers of spellwork gone wrong.”

Was this enough? Harry glanced up at Dumbledore for assurance but the headmaster didn’t give any sign as to whether or not he agreed with Harry’s sentence. The four children waited silently, expecting that Harry was not yet done.

Harry flung his arms open wide and said, exasperatedly, “Well, do you want me to assign more punishment?”

“No!” they chorused. The color was slowly starting to return to their cheeks.

Harry looked very seriously at the four. “I hope you know that what you did was very wrong.” They nodded vigorously. “Professor Snape is not a bad man. I know it seems that he is hurting me but it’s just that ... my medical treatment is a bit painful. He’s doing what the healers say needs to be done. Now, I think we have given everyone enough of a show. Why don’t we all get out of here?”

The four needed no urging. They scrambled to leave the Hall. Harry called after them, “And, I want you each to write Professor Snape an apology!”

The boy, Thomas, raised his hand to indicate that they had heard and the group of children rushed away before Harry or Dumbledore could change their minds and add more to their punishment.

Dumbledore permitted himself a slight smile at Harry. “Well done, Harry.”

Harry was relieved that Dumbledore approved. “I wish you had just decided what to do with them,” Harry muttered.

Dumbledore stared down at the teen and studied him gravely. "One of the hardest jobs that I have to do is to judge others, whether in my role as Headmaster or as part of the Wizengamot. It is inevitable that you will be one of the most powerfully influential wizards in our world. You must learn to judge wisely, Harry."

Harry stared back in dismay. "I don't want that responsibility."

"You have it whether you want it or not, Harry. And, based on your past acts, I believe that you will wield your responsibility with courage, kindness, and..." inclining his head in the direction where the four first years had just fled, "...mercy. And, there are some benefits to this influence, Harry. You can use it for good. To help end discrimination against muggleborns, for example."

Harry was silent, considering. Professor McGonagall approached. She had been among the silent witnesses to the spectacle of the last half hour. "Harry."

He gazed up at her. "You look exhausted. Perhaps, you should rest."

At her words, Harry realized that he was, indeed, exhausted. Waves of tiredness swept over him and the long walk back to Gryffindor Tower seemed daunting. Dumbledore signaled to Ron, who rushed to Harry's side.

"Mr. Weasley," rumbled Dumbledore. "Please help Harry back to his room. He needs to rest."

"Yes, sir," agreed Ron.

As Ron led Harry away, Hermione, Ginny, Dean, and some of the other players from Gryffindor trailed close behind.

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That night, Harry felt the familiar pull at his mind that indicated that he was to present himself at Snape's office. He knew that Professor Snape was still in the hospital wing, so he assumed that he would just

have to wait for an hour in an empty classroom. However, when he entered Snape's classroom, someone was waiting. Harry recognized one of the healers from St. Mungo's. Harry's stomach clenched.

"Hello, Harry," said the man, rising from the chair in which he had been sitting. He approached Harry, holding out his hand. "You may remember me. I am Healer Ainsley."

Harry shook the hand quickly. "Yes, sir," he said, in a strained tone. "I remember."

The Healer knew that Harry was not pleased to see him. "Headmaster Dumbledore contacted Healer Moulson to let us know that Professor Snape would be incapacitated for a few days. It's important, as you know, for your course of treatment to continue."

Harry knew that he was being unfair but he felt as if Dumbledore had betrayed him and he felt a renewed spurt of anger at the headmaster.

Healer Ainsley motioned to the bed in the corner and Harry reluctantly lay down. "Don't put me in a body bind, please," Harry muttered as he put his head down on the pillow.

"All right, Harry," said the Healer softly. "I'll do my best to be as gentle as possible."

Without further discussion, the Healer cast the spell and entered Harry's mind. Unlike Snape, Healer Ainsley wandered for a short time from room to room. He tried to open one door, but it was sealed. He pushed against it a few times, but it remained firmly set. Deciding that it was not worth demanding Harry open the door, considering how much damage remained in the other rooms, the Healer chose to begin attacking a large blot in the third room he had entered. He knew it would take many sessions to remove and he did not try to rush.

When the hour was up, Harry continued to lay in the bed breathing deeply for a few minutes. Images from the memory Healer Ainsley had been prodding paraded through Harry's head. He wished that he

could pluck the memory right out of his mind – which was sort of what the Healer was trying to do, when he thought about it.

Healer Ainsley waited in silence for Harry to compose himself. When the boy sat up, the older man helped him to stand. “I wish we didn’t have to do this, Harry,” the Healer muttered.

Harry was startled. He hadn’t thought about how this treatment would affect the people having to view his memories. “Yeah,” he responded. “The memories are awful. I’m sorry you have to see them.”

“That’s not what I meant, Harry,” said the Healer. “Your defeat of You Know Who...you saved our world, everything that I hold dear. My wife is muggleborn, you know. I am honored to be chosen to be on the team to help you. It hurts me that I have to hurt you though. It’s not easy to watch you in pain. I’m sorry.”

Harry looked up at the earnest face of the Healer. It was infuriating that this “medical treatment” was being forced upon him. But, somehow, knowing that the Healer was also unhappy about this treatment made it easier for Harry to bear.

There was a knock at the door, and Ron entered, ready to take Harry back to Gryffindor Tower.

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Chapter Thirty – Year Six; the Quidditch Match

Snape was in Madam Pomfrey's care for almost a week. Harry continued to see Healer Ainsley nightly. During the days, he settled into his classes. The other students continued to watch Harry constantly. Harry wondered if this was how very famous people felt. Did rock stars go through this? He couldn't walk the corridors without students falling silent as he passed. Thank Merlin some of his classmates began to become more relaxed in his company.

When Snape returned to his teaching duties, he made no mention of his almost fatal accident. Harry knew that the four Gryffindors had served detention with the potions master because they came back from their detention smelling of the frogs that Snape had made them pickle for hours. The four had avoided Harry after the incident, worried that Harry was angry with them. However, once the detention had been served, and the worst was over, they relaxed. Apparently believing that their experience forged a sort of bond with the Boy-Who-Lived, they became braver and soon were treating Harry with a familiarity that made them the envy of their more timid friends.

Snape resumed Harry's treatment. The first night that Snape returned, Harry thought the potions master might say something about Harry's saving his life. However, Snape did not say anything.

Meanwhile, Harry was counting the days until the Quidditch match. He couldn't wait. He had been told that he could invite two friends to go with him to the game. Knowing that Hermione was not a Quidditch fan, Harry invited Ron and Neville. He knew that Dean and Seamus were disappointed not to be asked, but at least they had each other as friends. Harry figured that Neville needed to feel included more than the other two boys. Harry knew that Neville was excited at being invited.

The day of the Quidditch match, Harry and his friends walked with Professor Snape to Hogsmeade, where they took a portkey to the Quidditch stadium. Before leaving the school, Harry transfigured his cloak to have a hood, which he was able to draw over his head, hiding his face. He had no wish to be recognized. Snape stared at

Harry sharply when Harry first pulled the hood over his head, but said nothing.

At the stadium, Harry looked eagerly around. There were thousands of witches and wizards packing the stadium. Harry had never seen so many magical people in one place before. Professor Snape led them up to a very high box in the stadium.

“Wow!” said Ron, impressed. “These are great seats!”

“This is the Minister’s box,” explained Professor Snape. “They have given it to us for our use today.”

“It’s good you know people in high places, Harry!” announced Ron.

Harry had the cynical thought that at least the Minister was good for something. These really were great seats.

“It’s amazing!” breathed Neville, looking over the banister. Snape grabbed the boy by the nape of the neck and pulled him back from the edge, before he could go toppling over.

Harry hid his smile at Snape’s annoyed expression and Neville’s alarmed one. “It is great!” admitted Harry. He pulled his hood more securely over his head and settled down to watch as the stadium filled with spectators.

The game was sure to be exciting, as the two teams were among the best in the league. The Montrose Magpies and the Ballycastle Bats were ranked number one and two, respectively. When the two teams entered the stadium, they were so impressive, Harry felt his breath catch in his chest. The Ballycastle Bats wore black robes with a scarlet bat across the chest. The Montrose Magpies also wore black and white robes, with a magpie on the front and back. [Note: from Quidditch Through the Ages]

Harry joined Ron and Neville in cheering loudly for the players. The Chudley Cannons were his team (which he had adopted because they were Ron’s favorite), so Harry rooted equally for the two teams

he was watching. He noted the skill of players on each side and clapped for any play that was particularly thrilling. The players were so fast that Harry didn't know which way to look.

Harry savored the excitement of being at a game. For the time being, at least, the depression that lurked at the corners of his mind was banished. No dark thoughts clouded his mind. He was just happy.

During a time out, Harry turned to Professor Snape and said, "Thank you, Professor, for taking us. It's fabulous!"

Ron and Neville immediately chorused their thanks as well.

Snape nodded and said politely, "You are welcome, Potter. I am ...pleased...that you are enjoying the game."

None of the group noticed that they had been overheard by a wizard in the next box. The man turned and stared sharply at the boy Snape had addressed. He had called him Potter. Harry Potter? Here?

The man turned his omnioculars on Harry, but the hood of the cloak obscured the boy's features. Excitedly, the man turned to his friends. "You see that wizard in the hood? I think that's Harry Potter!"

"Really?!" They craned their necks to see. "Why do you think so?"

"I overheard that man calling him Potter."

"I can't tell."

"Yeah, but why would anyone else be hiding behind a hooded cloak anyway? It's obviously someone who doesn't want to be recognized."

"What are you talking about Jake?" asked a witch, who had just returned from having purchased some pumpkin juice.

"Berty says that boy's Harry Potter!" said Jake pointing toward Harry's box.

At this, a number of wizards in surrounding boxes overheard. More heads turned and looked to see where Jake was pointing. And so on it went, with neighbors telling neighbors. In a surprisingly short amount of time, the rumor that Harry Potter was in attendance circulated throughout the stadium.

Professor Snape was the first to notice that something odd was happening in the stadium. Looking puzzled, he moved toward the railing of their box and scanned the crowd.

“What’s the matter, sir?” asked Harry.

“I’m not sure,” said the potions master slowly. “People don’t appear to be watching the match...”

The coach of the Ballycastle Bats called a time out when their Keeper let in one too many goals. When playing resumed (this time with a new Keeper), it appeared that the players had been affected by the same strange behavior as the crowd. While they continued to play Quidditch, the players seemed to spend as much time looking toward the crowd as they spent looking at each other. One player was almost knocked off his broom by a bludger because of his inattention.

The commentator also noticed the strange behavior of the teams but appeared to be equally clueless as to why the teams had lost their concentration. The booming voice called out, “And once again Melling is glancing toward the crowds. What is he looking for there? The snitch? What is going on, folks? The Magpies lost a golden opportunity there! The Ballycastle Bats left their hoops completely undefended. I haven’t seen such sloppy playing in years!”

But, the teams continued to play with a definite lack of focus. “What is going on...” began the commentator. He trailed off as someone whispered in his ear. Harry couldn’t see the commentator, but the man had imperfectly covered his magical megaphone and the crowd could hear that he was speaking with someone, although the words themselves were not audible. When he resumed his commentary, there was a note of excitement in his voice, “Witches and wizards!”

he began. "I've just been told that there is a rumor that Harry Potter is attending today's game!"

Harry immediately sucked in his breath and drew back in his chair. Neville, Ron and Snape all froze and then slowly moved closer to flank the boy. The people in the surrounding boxes, who were watching Harry closely, took these actions as confirmation that the cloaked figure was indeed the famous teen.

The commentator continued. "If it is true that Harry Potter is here, that would be an honor indeed! He has never been seen in public before."

More and more eyes turned in the direction of Harry's box. Although most of the crowd did not know that Harry was in this particular box, many knew that this section was reserved for the Minister's use. It seemed likely that, if Harry were to attend the game, he might very well be sitting in that box.

"We cannot apparate from inside the stadium," muttered Snape, under his breath. "I think if we try to leave now, we might attract the very attention we wish to avoid. I suggest we just keep quiet and hope that the people's attention will turn back to the game."

Harry said nothing. He sat frozen in his seat. No longer caught up in the game, he felt pinned by all the eyes staring his way.

A referee blew a whistle to halt the game, as it was clear that neither the players nor the crowd was paying enough attention. The commentator asked the burning question on everyone's mind, "Is Harry Potter really here? If you are here, Mr. Potter, won't you please let us know?" The crowd seemed to be waiting for a sign. When there was none, the commentator said in a grave voice, the excitement tampered down now in seriousness, "I believe I speak for everyone when I say that we are so happy you are back in the wizarding world, Mr. Potter. We wish you all the best. Bless you, sir!" This last was said with a choke in his voice.

There was a brief moment when the crowd waited to see if the commentator was finished. When it was clear that the man had stopped speaking, the crowd roared its approval. The noise rose

louder and louder. The crowd stood on its feet and cheered. It was like the greeting Harry had received at Hogwarts, but this was louder and fiercer. Here were adults who had lived with the terror of Voldemort's regime. They had lost friends and family members and knew that they had come but a breath away from having Voldemort win the war. They knew what they owed to the Boy Who Lived.

The air crackled with magical energy as the witches and wizards demonstrated their excitement. Harry felt the noise pour over him in waves. It was strangely frightening to be the focus of this much attention.

He should turn his back on them and say that he didn't want their cheers and admiration. After all, weren't they – this faceless mass of people – to blame for the prejudice against muggleborns that fostered Voldemort's rise to power? Weren't they to blame for the fact he was under an indenture?

But, the truth was he wanted their love and respect. And, wasn't it unfair to judge them too harshly? Was it their fault that, at their deepest nature, people were not to be trusted? How could he demand of them what they could never give him?

Of course, he didn't deserve their admiration. They wouldn't cheer him if they realized how dirty he was. The things he had done while in Voldemort's head...

But, they were calling his name and cheering for him now, just as he had always pictured over the bleak years of his childhood. It may not be deserved, but it was happening. Here and now. His dream come true. He may have thought he didn't care about such things any more. He may have thought he had put such childish dreams behind him. But, his heart beat faster and he felt the pull of the crowd.

Slowly, Harry stood.

"Harry!" Snape called his name in a low voice, so as not to be overheard. "You don't need to do..."

But, the professor stopped when Harry turned to look at him. The boy's green eyes shone with a glow that reminded Snape so strongly of Lily, that he felt a lump rise in his throat. "It's okay, Professor," assured Harry.

Slowly, Harry approached the railing. The crowd noticed that a figure in the Minister's box had stood and was moving close to the edge. They quieted immediately and held their collective breath. Harry reached up and pulled the hood from his head. His thick, dark, messy hair blew in the slight breeze. His green eyes, highlighted by glasses, looked over the stadium.

The crowd gasped when they saw that the hooded figure was a young boy. Was it really Harry Potter? Omnioculars focused on the boy, trying to catch a glimpse of his famous scar.

Harry withdrew his wand from his robe sleeve. He held it to his throat and magnified his voice, so that he, like the commentator, could be heard throughout the stadium. "Hello," he began, uncertainly. "I am Harry Potter."

The crowd let out an involuntarily roar. They couldn't believe that he was here. Really here! The boy who had been the focus of over fifteen years of legend. The baby who had mysteriously defeated the Dark Lord and then been sent away to live with his muggle relatives. The eleven year old who, after being abused during his childhood years, had disappeared into thin air, but who had secretly masqueraded as a muggleborn and lived among them. The fourteen year old who had been sent to Azkaban for a crime he had not committed and who had survived even the Dementors. The fifteen year old who had defeated the Dark Lord once and for all but then had abandoned the wizarding world in anger. The sixteen year who had been retrieved and brought back to his rightful place – the jewel in the crown of the magical world. Harry Potter! The Boy Who Lived! The Golden Boy! And look how handsome he was! Just like the little prince he was!

So many people snapped pictures, the clicking sounded like a swarm of insects. "Er..." Harry began and the crowd quieted again. "Thank you," he said. "You all know that I wasn't treated very well when I was

Mark Twist. I don't know that I'll ever be able to forgive that." The crowd was so silent that Harry could hear a dog barking in the far distance. Eyes clouded with guilt and regret gazed at the boy. "But, I appreciate your welcome now. And I hope that the wizarding world can learn to be more fair and to treat other people with more respect."

The crowd clapped wildly again, anxious to show Harry that they were willing to try harder to be less prejudiced. Harry watched them with a mix of pleasure and pain. He was glad that they appeared willing to be more tolerant. But, he knew that there was so much prejudice underlying their world. They might be trying harder to treat muggles and muggleborns better. But, what about the way other magical creatures, such as elves, goblins, and others, were treated? The way that the Ministry and Dumbledore had manhandled him? This world had a long way to go in learning how to treat others. But, was Dumbledore right in saying that Harry could use his influence to help this world improve?

After a small pause, Harry continued, "I...I'm not really sure what more to say to you all. But, if you don't mind, it would be great to see the rest of the game. I really like Quidditch." He sat down and the crowd roared again its happiness at having their little prince act like a typical teenager.

The game resumed but Harry was aware that many eyes focused on him throughout the game. It made it difficult for him to enjoy the match as much as he wished, since he was aware that his every expression was being scrutinized. But, the game was thrilling and the final dive by the Magpie Seeker was phenomenal. When the Seeker pulled up from the dive, snitch in hand, the whistle blew signaling the end of the game.

Harry clapped loudly for the play. He was wondering whether he could practice pulling out of a dive with just that touch of a roll when he realized that the Magpie Seeker had approached the railing. Hovering on his broom, right outside the railing, the Seeker looked straight at Harry. The older man held out the snitch and Harry automatically drew near the railing and took the little winged ball from the Seeker.

“I would like you to have the game snitch, Harry Potter,” said the Quidditch player.

“Thank you,” said Harry, sincerely. He held the little ball up to his eyes and admired it.

“Thank you,” said the man. “After we shower and change, the team will have a celebratory dinner. We would be honored if you and your friends would accompany us.”

Ron whispered at his elbow, “Say yes, Harry. Say yes!”

Harry glanced back at Snape, seeking permission. At his slight nod, Harry turned back eagerly and said, “Sure! That would be great! Oh, and your last dive – it was spectacular!”

The man smiled at the admiration in Harry’s voice. “I must rejoin my teammates,” he said. “We should be ready in less than half an hour.”

“Thanks!” Harry called again, as the player flew down to join his friends.

“Wow!” said Neville. “We’re going to have dinner with the Magpies.”

“Can I have your autograph?” called a wizard from the next box. Harry turned, startled. He had been so focused on the thrill of meeting the Magpie Seeker, he had momentarily forgotten that everyone else in the stadium was thrilled to be seeing him.

“Oh...” said Harry, not sure how to respond. If he said yes, wouldn’t everyone else want one too?

Before he could decide, Snape intervened. “I’m sorry, but Mr. Potter is not permitted to give out autographs,” he said in a harsh tone. Harry threw him a grateful look.

“Who are you?” asked the other man, belligerently.

The man's wife tugged at his robe sleeve and whispered in his ear. Obviously, she had remembered Scrimgeour's interview with Rita Skeeter and was reminding her husband that Potter was under an indenture to Snape. The man flushed and then muttered under his breath, "Don't see why the boy isn't permitted to give autographs. Snape probably wants to limit the number so that he can make money selling them!"

Snape pursed his lips in annoyance but said nothing.

Harry wondered how they were going to leave the stadium without being trampled by the thousands of people wanting to meet him. He exchanged worried looks with Neville and Ron. But, the Magpie's owner sent a representative up to their box with brooms for the four to fly down to the team's locker room. It was strange to mount a broom and fly with so many eyes on him.

"I wish we could just take a quick turn around the pitch," said Ron longingly.

"Mr. Weasley," said Snape in a warning voice.

"I just said 'I wish'," said Ron hastily.

Harry spent the next two hours in a haze. He met and shook the hands of players he read about in the sports section of the Daily Prophet. He and his friends were given team gifts – a Magpie figurine which cawed every hour to announce the time; a scarf in their colors and a travel mug with the team's logo to hold hot pumpkin juice.

The owner of the Ballycastle Bats stopped by and, after speaking briefly with the Magpie's owner, brought his team's players to join the celebration, as they were equally eager to meet Harry. The players of the opposing teams knew each other well from the years on the traveling circuit. There was some good-natured bantering, with the Magpies gloating over their recent victory and the Bats promising revenge in their next meet.

Each player was introduced to Harry and he became used to being slapped on the back and having his hand pumped up and down. It didn't bother Harry to be the focus of all this attention this time since he was equally guilty of stargazing. He was thrilled to meet the famous faces that graced the covers of Quidditch for the Serious Fan. Harry was familiar with most of the players since Dean Thomas subscribed to the monthly magazine and was happy to let his friends flip through when he was done reading it.

Harry was careful to include Ron and Neville in his conversations with the players. The boys chatted about Quidditch strategy with the older men and Harry didn't remember ever being so happy; he knew that Ron and Neville were also ecstatic. Snape stood off to the side, clearly wishing he could leave but indulging the boy by letting him meet the players.

One of the players asked Harry if he played Quidditch himself.

Ron answered for him. "Harry is a great player and would be the Seeker on our House team if only he would agree to play. You should see him! He's a natural flyer," he boasted.

Harry flushed with a mixture of pleasure and embarrassment.

Another player interrupted. "Is it true that you can fly without a broom?"

There was a sudden hush as everyone waited to hear Harry's answer. Harry felt as if cold water had been thrown over him. Flying without a broom was a talent Harry had learned from Voldemort and had used during his final battle with the Dark Lord. As far as Harry knew, no other wizard had ever mastered this trick. Did they think he was a dark wizard?

Reluctantly, Harry nodded. The men exchanged excited glances with each other. "What wouldn't I give to be able to fly without a broom!" said one.

"Can you teach us how to do that?" asked another. The other players gazed eagerly at Harry and awaited his answer.

Harry was taken aback by their interest. "I...I'm sorry," he said. "I don't think it's something I can teach. It's just sort of something that I...know...how to do." The men looked extremely disappointed. "Flying with a broom is more fun," he offered.

One of the Chasers smiled at Harry and said, "Yeah. But just imagine how Quidditch could be played if we didn't need brooms!"

Harry was struck by the image. Maybe that would be cool. But, he had no interest in flying without a broom himself. It reminded him too much of Voldemort.

"I think it is time that we said our goodbyes, Potter," said Snape, who had come to stand next to Harry.

Harry was not sorry to go. He was starting to feel exhausted. Bidding the players goodbye, the boys accompanied Professor Snape outside the stadium to the portkey site.

However, as they left the stadium, a horde of reporters descended upon them, shouting and vying for attention. The reporters had learned that Harry had been present at the game and they had arrived at the stadium hoping to catch the boy as he left. Harry recognized Rita Skeeter among the dozens of reporters who surrounded them and shouted questions at him. Cameras flashed in his face and he saw spots.

He was jostled from all sides, as reporters pressed in and tried to have their questions answered first. "Harry! Over here! How does it feel to be back in the wizarding world?"

"Harry, is it true that you won't speak to Dumbledore?"

"Harry! Harry! Do you have a girlfriend?"

"Are you going to join the Montrose Magpies as the new Seeker?"

"How do you feel about your indenture Harry?"

“Will you look this way for a photograph?”

“Is it true that you perform exercises in the Dark Arts every night to keep in practice?”

Snape snarled at the reporters and a few backed away in fear. “Let us pass!” Snape pulled out his wand.

Harry wished he was 17 and could pull out his wand as well. Snape flourished his wand and angry sparks flew out the end. The reporters fell silent and eyed the wand with fear.

“Back off!” he commanded. With his clenched jaw and fierce eyes, it was easy to remember that he had once been a Death Eater.

The boys huddled close to Snape as they moved toward the portkey. “Take hold of my robe,” he commanded the three, keeping his wand trained on the reporters to hold them at bay.

Cameras continued to flash at Harry as he held tight to Snape’s robe. Snape grabbed the portkey, and the four disappeared in a swirl of color.

Moments later, they arrived back in Hogsmeade. Snape released the portkey and the boys stood back from the potions master.

Snape cast a quick look at Harry. The boy was pale and clearly exhausted. It was a shame that the day had ended on this irritating note. The teen had been enjoying himself.

The little group traipsed back to the castle in silence. Only after they had entered the Hall did Harry speak. “Thank you, sir. It was an amazing day.”

Ron and Neville added their thanks as well.

“You are welcome,” said Snape in a haughty tone. “You behaved yourself moderately well. I was not too embarrassed.”

Harry smiled, choosing to be amused rather than annoyed at Snape's words.

"I know that you are tired, Potter. But, before you leave, I would have a word." Harry waited, curious. "You saw today just how much the wizarding world is ...interested...in you."

Snape ignored Ron's snort. "You should consider that by answering some of the questions about yourself you might appease a bit of the curiosity. At the moment, you are a figure of mystery and the public is clamoring for information."

Harry looked doubtful. "You mean I should give an interview? Then, the reporters would leave me alone?"

"Whether or not you choose to give an interview is up to you, Potter. As the boy who defeated the Dark Lord, it is unlikely that the reporters will ever leave you entirely alone. However, you might be able to dampen some of the furor."

"You should totally do it, Harry!" encouraged Ron.

"I am never going to speak with Rita Skeeter!" said Harry fiercely.

Snape did not need to ask why Harry felt particular animus to that woman. "There are other reporters," he said calmly.

"I...I'll think about it," said Harry. "Thank you again." And, with that, he said goodbye and returned to Gryffindor Tower to rest before dinner.

He knew that Snape meant well but the man didn't understand. If he gave an interview, the reporter was bound to ask questions that Harry was not prepared to answer. It was inevitable that he would be asked about Voldemort and how he felt at defeating the Dark Lord. How could he explain his feelings about the Dark Lord? He had hated Voldemort with a passion that few could match, as he had seen – really seen – the evil of which Tom Riddle was capable.

But, Voldemort was also his teacher and his refuge. For close to a year, Harry had spent almost his entire life inside the older wizard's mind. Harry had felt drawn to that mind even when he could have stayed quietly in his cell in Azkaban. Partly, it had kept him sane. But, wasn't it also true that Voldemort's sheer power which had cast a strange allure?

If he tried to explain, would everyone finally realize that his Aunt Petunia was right? He really was a freak.

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Chapter Thirty One – Year Six; Professor Draco

The next morning, at breakfast, several of the students held copies of the Daily Prophet. Harry blushed to see his photograph staring out of the front page, under the headline, “The Face of Harry Potter”. His photographic image was looking a little to the left and smiling slightly.

Harry thought that the photograph must have been snapped in the split second before he had realized that the reporters had descended upon them. He was pretty sure he had been speaking with Ron at the moment that the photograph had been taken. His photographic self would face straight forward every so often, look surprised and a little shy and sidle slightly toward the edge of the frame.

Harry pretended great interest in his breakfast as Hermione unfolded the paper in front of her porridge bowl. “You should have brushed your hair, Harry.”

“What?” he asked startled. He raised a hand uncertainly to his head. He was pretty sure that he had brushed his hair this morning. Hadn’t he? Hermione’s question made him cast his mind back to his morning grooming and, after a moment in thought, he nodded his head decisively and said, “I did brush my hair.”

She smirked. “I don’t mean today, Harry. I meant for the photograph!” She pointed a finger toward the Daily Prophet cover.

“Oh,” Harry ducked his head and blushed. Under his breath, he muttered, “I wasn’t expecting anyone to be snapping photos.”

“Don’t worry, Harry,” Hermione soothed. “It’s actually quite a good picture of you.”

Harry looked up, and rolled his eyes. “I wasn’t worrying!”

“I’m glad it’s a good picture,” continued Hermione. “Don’t forget, most people had no idea what you looked like, Harry. This is the first chance they have of seeing you.”

Ron, overhearing, leaned over and said, "It's too bad that they'll be disappointed to see your ugly mug!"

"Ron!" scolded Hermione. "Harry looks very handsome."

Harry knew Ron was just teasing, but he thought Hermione was being kind. Studying his photograph with a critical eye, he saw the edges of his scar peeking out from behind his bangs. He wished he had brushed his hair – he would have made sure that his scar was hidden.

"Admiring yourself, Potter?"

Harry dropped the paper as if it were on fire and spun around. There was Draco. Harry's face flamed.

"No!" spluttered Harry. "I was just...just..."

"Not interested, Potter," dismissed Draco, with a regal wave of his hand. "I am here to collect."

"Collect?"

"You may remember that we had a bet. A bet in which you promised to do one thing I asked you to do?"

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. He swallowed and nodded, his eyes fixed on Draco's. Oh, no!

Around him, Hermione and Ron waited with baited breath.

Draco allowed the silence to build, enjoying Harry's alarm. "What?!" Harry demanded, hating the suspense.

Draco smirked, pleased. "You will be attending the Minister's brunch next Saturday with me. Elmer Fellwert is giving a lecture on the importance of foreign investment in Brazil for the production of potion ingredients. My father will be there, as will many prominent wizard

families. These type of meetings occur every few months and it will be a coup for me to have you attend as my guest.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. He had thought Draco might make him walk through the halls of Hogwarts singing the school song at the top of his lungs, or some other similar ridiculous, but embarrassing, prank. Automatically, Harry started to shake his head.

“No, no. Thank you for the invitation, Draco. But, I really don’t want to go.”

Draco’s smirk grew. “Not an invitation, Potter. An order.”

“That’s unfair!”

“Is it too gross?” Harry shook his head. “Awful?” Harry shook his head again, reluctantly. “Embarrassing?” Harry shook his head one last time. “Then, according to our rules, you must do what I ask,” Draco finished triumphantly.

“Why do you have to go?” Ron asked Draco, curiously. “It sounds boring!”

Draco’s lip lifted in a slight sneer but he tried to keep his tone pleasant enough. “I have attended such events all my life. It is the obligation of those in power to train their children to assume the mantle of leadership.”

Ron and Harry exchanged blank looks at this pompous statement. Under his breath, Ron said, “You and Percy would have gotten along really well.”

Harry meanwhile was casting around for reasons why he couldn’t attend the function. “Snape won’t let me go!” he told Draco, relieved that he had hit upon a valid excuse.

“Already asked him,” retorted Draco. “He’s says it’ll be good for you.”

Harry cast a glare up at the teacher's table. Snape was watching him, but merely lifted a haughty eyebrow at the scowl on Harry's face.

"The Minister's an idiot! I don't to go anywhere near him."

Draco lifted an eyebrow. "Potter, it is often the case that governmental officials are idiots. In fact, sometimes I think it is a requirement of the job. That is no excuse not to cultivate political influence."

"Dumbledore!" Harry tried again. "Dumbledore won't want me to go. He doesn't like underage students to leave the school unsupervised."

Draco shook his head slowly, enjoying watching Harry squirm. "No good, Potter. Dumbledore will be there!"

Harry looked at Draco, appalled. The blond smiled and said, "Just remember, though. You're coming as my guest. You'll be sitting next to me at the table."

"It sounds as if you want to parade Harry as some sort of trophy!" objected Hermione.

Draco wasn't thrilled to be addressed by Hermione, but he made an effort to be polite. "As a result of my family's unfortunate association with You Know Who, we have lost some prestige," he admitted honestly. "However, having Harry Potter at my side – that will help to re-establish us quite nicely!"

"Is that why you wanted to be friends, Draco?" asked Harry, bitterly.

Draco lost his smile and stared seriously at the other boy. "No, Harry. I meant what I said to you. I am never going to forget what You Know Who was really like and how lucky we are that you were able to defeat him. But," and he smiled brightly again, "I am a Slytherin and I know how to turn events to my advantage. I have been thinking and thinking about what to do with the bet you lost and this event is perfect!"

“Damn!” said Harry, trapped.

“Next Saturday, Potter! Make sure you wear some nice robes. Oh, and brush your hair!”

The next Saturday saw a very reluctant Harry accompany Dumbledore and Draco to the Ministry. They used the floo in Dumbledore’s office, which had a direct connection to the Ministry for the day.

A Ministry representative was waiting for them and immediately escorted them directly to the private salon where the brunch was being held. There were ten round tables, each seating about ten people. Each table held a beautiful arrangement of flowers, topping the white tablecloths. Crystal, china, and goblin-wrought utensils sparkled at each setting.

Well-dressed witches and wizards were standing around the room, mingling and sipping delicately at their goblets. Elves discreetly circulated, passing around hors d’oeuvres and refilling glasses.

When he entered, Harry glanced around the room. The witches and wizards had an air of wealth and power. And, from the expensive rug at his feet to the mahogany panels and serious-faced portraits decorating the walls, the room smelled of money.

As Dumbledore and the boys entered the room, everyone fell silent. Harry was learning to expect this reaction but it was still awkward to feel pinned by all eyes in a room. Scrimgeour strode over to the group immediately.

“Welcome! Welcome!” He shook Dumbledore and Draco’s hands, but his eyes never left Harry. When he shook Harry’s hand (which Harry had offered reluctantly), he didn’t release it but used the momentum of his hand shake to pull the boy forward.

“Harry! We are so incredibly pleased to have you here today. There are a number of people who are eager to meet you. Please let me introduce you around.”

Harry’s eyes widened in alarm and he was already shaking his head when Dumbledore intervened. “Rufus. Let’s not forget that Harry is Draco’s guest.” Draco cast a grateful look at the headmaster. “I’m sure that Draco would be pleased for you to accompany him as he makes his rounds.”

“Certainly!” agreed Scrimgeour, but he looked less than pleased. Harry pulled his hand free from the Minister’s grip and took a step backwards. But Draco’s hand on his back propelled him forward again.

“First, Harry, I’d like to say hello to my father,” said Draco, steering Harry toward Lucius Malfoy who was standing in the midst of a group of wizards, silently observing his son arrive.

Harry had no intention of shaking Lucius’ hand. Lucius had been among the Death Eaters present the night Voldemort had been reborn. He had “seen” Lucius through Voldemort’s eyes over the months Harry had peeked into the Dark Lord’s mind. The only reason Lucius turned against Voldemort was because the Dark Lord was such a nut job that even his own Death Eaters weren’t safe. If Voldemort had only hurt other people, Lucius would have been happy to stay a Death Eater, loyal to Voldemort to the end.

Harry needn’t have worried. Lucius was a clever man and knew better than to risk a rebuff. He lifted the goblet he was holding in Harry’s direction. The fire-whiskey inside swirled, catching the light. “Mr. Potter,” said Lucius politely.

Harry gave a small inclination of his own head.

Not wishing to risk any further interaction between his father and Harry, Draco quickly drew Harry’s attention to the other members of Lucius’ group. Harry didn’t even attempt to remember their names. He murmured polite greetings and shook the hands of the nearest

wizards and witches, inclining his head politely to those who stood further away.

As they moved away to join another group, Draco whispered in Harry's ear, "I am going to quiz you later to see whose names you remember, so pay attention!" Harry's eyes widened in alarm and he cast a look at Draco to see if he was joking. Unfortunately, Draco looked very serious.

Scrimgeour and Draco flanked Harry as they moved from group to group. Harry made an effort to remember the names of the witches and wizards he met, but there were so many of them! The conversation was rather predictable. Everyone expressed their pleasure at meeting him and asked how he was feeling and whether he was enjoying being back at Hogwarts.

When the clock struck noon, Scrimgeour asked people to take their seats to eat their meals while the guest speaker gave his presentation. Harry found himself steered to a table next to the speaker podium. Draco sat to his left with Dumbledore in the next seat. Scrimgeour sat on Harry's right. Harry didn't know the other people at his table but he obediently greeted them and repeated their names when Draco refreshed his memory.

The lecture that followed wasn't as bad as he was expecting. The speaker was entertaining even though his topic was a bit boring. He was certainly very persuasive. Harry was convinced that investment in Brazil was critical to the future economy of the British Isles by the time Mr. Fellwert was done speaking.

After his speech, Mr. Fellwert joined Harry's table to eat his own meal and to enjoy a leisurely dessert. In the more relaxed setting of the after-meal tea and coffee, Mr. Fellwert started to grill Harry on his financial future.

"So, Mr. Potter, I hope that you found my little talk interesting."

"Yes, sir," said Harry politely. "Very."

“Have I convinced you that you should invest in Brazil? After all, you hold the purse strings to the Potter and Black fortunes. You need to make wise financial decisions.”

Harry was startled. He hadn't thought of himself as wealthy before. How much money did he have?

Dumbledore responded in Harry's stead. “Harry is still underage, Elmer. They'll be time enough to ask him to invest in your schemes when he is of age.”

“Who is making his financial decisions now? Snape?”

Dumbledore shook his head. “Harry's investments are being managed directly by the goblins at Gringott's. They are a conservative lot, as you know. They will make sure that there is no danger to the principal.”

“Will Harry be able to make his own decisions when he reaches 17?” asked Fellwert.

Harry's cheeks flamed. “Still here!” he snapped. The people at the table looked at him in surprise. Harry's cheeks burned more hotly. “I just don't like people talking about me as if I'm not here,” he muttered.

“I'm sorry,” apologized Fellwert. “You are quite right. I don't mean to be rude.”

“Just don't do it again,” Harry muttered.

Fellwert returned to his topic. “If you're going to have to make financial decisions in just a few months, it is important that you learn all you can about your options. I can help there.”

Draco piped up. “I am going to be teaching Harry.”

“What?” asked Harry, but his involuntarily outburst was lost among the startled comments from the other people at their table.

Dumbledore said nothing; it was clear he, at least, was not surprised by this announcement.

Draco ignored Harry and spoke directly to Fellwert. "I will be tutoring Harry in financial matters as well as a number of other things on which he is woefully ignorant."

"Like what?!" demanded Harry, stung.

Only after he said this did he realize that he should have waited until after the meal to confront Draco. Everyone was eagerly listening to the exchange.

Draco was not shy in pointing out Harry's deficiencies. "You have no grounding in wizarding protocol. You need to learn proper etiquette, formal conduct, and wizarding genealogy."

Harry must have made a face at the mention of wizarding genealogy, because Draco continued. "I'm not talking about pureblood status, Potter. I am talking about knowing who is related to whom. It's very important."

Harry would have scoffed but most of the other witches and wizards at the table were nodding their heads seriously.

Scrimgeour added, "I think that's a great idea, Draco. You're right that we need to fill this serious gap in Harry's education."

Draco sat up straighter, basking in the attention of the Minister and other wizards. "I am pleased to do my part to help Harry take his place in the wizarding world."

Harry snorted and, under the table, Draco stepped on his foot. "I have already spoken with Professor Snape. I will be giving Harry lessons three times a week, an hour a day."

"You're kidding!" Harry burst out again.

One of the witches at the table gave a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh, but she pulled her napkin close to her lips so Harry couldn't tell for sure.

"I am not," said Draco, in that superior tone of his that made Harry want to smack him. "I have already drawn up a syllabus and we start Monday. You will receive marks for the class and have a final exam."

Harry glanced over to Dumbledore. "Is this true? Is Draco really going to be teaching me Wizard...stuff?" Harry trailed off at the end, at a loss for what to call this proposed class.

"It sounds like a good idea to me, Harry," Dumbledore admitted.

"But, he's my age!"

Draco interrupted. "I am not boasting when I say, Potter, that there are few who have the depth of knowledge in this area that I do." Harry didn't doubt that he was telling the truth. Draco was every inch the aristocrat.

Harry looked from Draco to Dumbledore in concern. "Is he going to be like a real teacher?"

"What do you mean, Harry?" asked Dumbledore.

"I mean can he give me detentions? I'm not letting Draco give me detentions!"

There was no mistaking the giggle from the witch in the corner now. A number of other wizards were smiling as well.

"Do not worry, Potter," said Draco, in his deliberate drawl. "I will only give you detentions if you fail to do the homework."

Harry bared his teeth at the other boy. Draco laughed.

Dumbledore, a note of amusement in his voice, reassured Harry. "Draco will not be able to give you detentions, Harry. If there is a

problem with the class, he will speak with Professor Snape or with me.”

“Oh,” Harry subsided. He wasn’t sure he liked the idea of Draco playing teacher but, at least, he wasn’t going to be a “real” teacher.

Scrimgeour joined in again. “As part of Harry’s education, I hope he can continue to join us at these events.”

Harry shrank back in his seat. He had no interest in coming again. But, he heard Draco speaking for him, “Don’t worry, Minister. Attending these lunches will be part of Harry’s homework assignments!”

Under his breath, Harry groaned. Draco stepped on his foot again.

The next number of weeks passed quietly enough. Harry started his classes with Draco, which were surprisingly difficult. Draco took the project very seriously. Harry had nightly homework and long term projects as well. At first, he was irritated by the assignments. But, when he complained to Ron about having to memorize the family tree of Edrich the Often, Ron had looked at him in shock, appalled that Harry didn’t already know this information.

When Harry complained that no one was making muggleborn students learn this information, Hermione pointed out that muggleborns weren’t expected to perform the duties reserved for heads of the oldest families. As the last in the Potter line, and heir to the Black fortune, Harry would have obligations that would not have been expected to be the lot of a muggleborn.

Grudgingly, Harry began to accept that perhaps Draco had a point, and wizarding children grew up knowing things that he had better learn. It came as a surprise to both Harry and Draco that the blond boy had an aptitude for teaching. He was a strict teacher, in the manner of Professor Snape. But, he was clever at explaining points in a way that Harry was able to recall.

Not surprisingly, Harry found many of his other subjects to be very boring. In recognition of his skill with certain classes (such as Charms, Transfiguration, and Defense Against the Dark Arts), Dumbledore had suggested that Harry take the opportunity to learn about other subjects of interest to him. Taking that advice, Harry usually read quietly during a number of his classes, learning about goblins, mermaids, centaurs and elves. This independent study wasn't for any grade, but at least he didn't feel as if he were wasting his time.

Soon, the Christmas holidays approached. Harry put his name down on the list of students wishing to go to Hogsmeade. Professor Snape agreed that he could go, which was a relief because Harry had Christmas gifts to purchase.

Unfortunately, the day before the scheduled trip, Ron was given the news by Professor Vector, the astronomy professor, that he would need to hand in an extra credit paper if he hoped to receive a passing grade for this semester. Hermione agreed to stay behind and help him with the paper. Harry offered to stay and help too but Ron told him it wasn't necessary.

"It's not like you learned anything interesting about astronomy from You Know Who," Ron lamented. Then, with a note of hope, he asked, "Or did you?"

Harry shook his head and smiled. It felt good to hear Ron refer to Harry's "apprenticeship" with You Know Who so casually.

"You might as well go to Hogsmeade," said Ron sadly. "I'm just sorry I'm not showing you the new broom store. I had wanted to be with you when you saw it for the first time!"

"Tell you what," said Harry. "I'll go visit Hagrid instead. I'll leave the broom store for another day. Okay?"

"I don't want to make you wait," said Ron, but it was clear that he really would prefer Harry to wait.

“It’s okay. Really. I can go another time. The first time to the broom store will be with you.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” said Ron, looking happier.

Harry left to visit Hagrid and Ron and Hermione headed for the library where they spent the next hour pouring over astronomy books.

Suddenly, in a magnified voice that could be heard throughout the castle, they heard Dumbledore’s voice saying, “Harry Potter. Please report to Professor Snape’s office immediately. Harry Potter. Please report to Professor Snape’s office immediately.”

Ron and Hermione exchanged scared looks and bolted from the library, heading towards Snape’s office. Ron knocked on the closed door and was told to enter.

Dumbledore, McGonagall and Snape were all standing in the room talking to each other and looking grave. They looked up as the teenagers entered and Dumbledore asked sharply, “Where’s Harry?”

“He went to visit Hagrid, sir,” said Hermione, in a scared voice.

“Dobby!” There was a sound of a loud pop and an elf immediately appeared. “Would you please go to Hagrid’s and ask Harry Potter to return to the castle immediately. Have him come here, please.”

“Dobby would be honored to fetch Harry Potter, sir!” said Dobby, bowing low. And, with another loud pop, the elf disappeared.

“What’s happened, sir?” asked Ron.

Looking very somber, Dumbledore explained, “Bellatrix Lestrange escaped from Azkaban this morning. She killed the Auror who was guarding her. She is armed with a wand and, I don’t need to tell you, extremely dangerous.”

“And you think that Harry’s in particular danger?” asked Hermione.

Snape said harshly, "Bellatrix was obsessed with the Dark Lord. It is highly likely that she will do everything in her power to wreck vengeance for his defeat."

McGonagall continued, "She was seen heading north – in this direction."

Another loud pop and Dobby returned. "Dobby is sorry, sir," mourned the elf, bowing so low, his nose almost touched the floor. "Harry Potter was not there."

"What?" demanded Ron. "What do you mean?"

"Hagrid told Dobby that Harry Potter did not come to visit him today."

The tension in the room mounted higher. "Albus!" Snape took a step forward, an urgent note in his voice.

"We'll find him, Severus," calmed Dumbledore, but there was no familiar sparkle in his eyes.

"Dobby, please have the house elves look throughout the castle for Mr. Potter," instructed Dumbledore.

"Yes, sir," nodded Dobby and, again, he disappeared with a pop.

"I have a map, sir," Ron suddenly remembered. "It's actually Harry's map. My brothers, Fred and George, gave it to him. But, when he (Mark Twist that is) went to Azkaban, and he left his possessions behind, I kept the map."

Snape looked impatient with this long-winded explanation of the map's history. Dumbledore waved for Ron to continue. Ron took a deep breath, "Anyway, this map shows everyone in the castle."

"What do you mean?" asked Dumbledore. Snape looked interested now.

“It shows the location of everyone in the castle. I’ll show you.” Ron darted away and returned with the map in short order. He was gasping from having run through the castle.

He tapped the map with his wand and muttered, “I solemnly swear I am up to no good.” Soon, the Marauders’ Map was laid out in all its glory showing little bubbles where everyone in the castle was.

“What an amazing map!” complimented Dumbledore.

Tapping his wand on the map, Dumbledore asked, “Where is Professor Snape?” The bubble showing Snape burned red and was clearly visible on the map. “Where is Argus Filch?” The bubble with Filch’s name burned red in its turn, showing the caretaker in one of the classrooms in the basement.

Clear that the map would work, Dumbledore touched it again and asked, “Where is Harry Potter?” No red bubble appeared. Everyone stared at the map in dismay.

“Let me try!” urged Snape. He repeated the tests that Dumbledore had tried, and the map showed where other people in the castle were at that moment. But, the map was stubbornly silent when it came to Harry Potter.

Hermione even suggested that they try the name “Mark Twist” but no luck either.

Dumbledore sent his magnified voice throughout the castle once more, asking students to report to the Great Hall. Once there, Dumbledore explained that Bellatrix Lestrange had escaped. Neville Longbottom turned pale but stood very straight.

“We’re asking for your help now,” continued Dumbledore. “We need to ensure that Harry Potter is safe but apparently he is not in the castle. We would ask that groups of students form search parties to find Harry. If you are willing, please form groups of four.”

Everyone in the room immediately clustered into groups of four. Snape, McGonagall and Dumbledore assigned each group an area of the school grounds to cover.

Hagrid was sent to the Forbidden Forest to ask the Centaurs if they had seen Harry. Dumbledore went himself to the Dark Lake and asked the Merpeople the same.

The hours passed and the students returned without success. Dumbledore took the final report from Hagrid, who had just returned from the Forbidden Forest with no news from the Centaurs. Looking very worried, the headmaster rose from his chair. It was time to contact the Minister.

At that moment, there was a commotion at the door and the students who had spent the day in Hogsmeade returned to the Hall. They had not yet heard the news of Bellatrix's escape or Harry Potter's disappearance and they were all smiles and good cheer. Strolling among them, speaking with Seamus Finnegan, was Harry Potter himself.

The students in the Great Hall stared at Harry in surprise. They had just spent hours looking for the boy and here he was, just sauntering in as calmly as could be. There was a little roar from the staff table and everyone cast an anxious look at Professor Snape. The teacher had a frightening expression on his face.

In swift movements, the potions master had rounded the table and reached Harry's side. Startled, Harry looked at the professor in alarm. The professor's face was screwed up in fury. Grabbing the teen's arms, Snape shook him furiously. "Where were you?! Where were you?!" he yelled.

"Severus!" The sharp voice called Snape back to himself.

Snape released Harry and stepped back, still shaking with anger. Dumbledore laid a calming hand on Snape's forearm.

"Harry," said Dumbledore in a quiet voice. "Where were you?"

The boy was dazed. He couldn't understand how come Professor Snape had attacked him. Casting a nervous look at the professor, he said, "I've been in Hogsmeade."

"Hogsmeade!" ejaculated Snape.

"You...you gave me permission, sir," reminded Harry tentatively.

"But you said you weren't going to go," said Ron, unable to keep quiet.

Harry cast Ron a quick look but then looked back at Snape. He was afraid to take his eyes off the unpredictable man. "I was shopping for holiday gifts. I wanted to surprise you. I didn't go into the broom store though!"

"You, sir, are grounded!" Snape spat out the words, teeth clenched.

"I...I don't understand. Why?" asked Harry, completely confused.

"You may not have meant to do so, Harry, but I'm afraid you gave everyone quite a scare," Dumbledore explained. "Bellatrix Lestrange has escaped and, we believe, may be looking for you. When we couldn't find you in the castle or on the grounds, we were concerned that she might have harmed you already."

Harry's eyes blazed and his hands formed into fists at the mention of Bellatrix's name.

Snape made a huge effort to regain control of his emotions. "You need not worry about Bellatrix, Potter. She is a problem for the Aurors. I suggest you concern yourself with the detention you will be serving tonight and every night this week!"

"Detention! For what?!"

"For leaving Hogwarts without my knowledge!"

“I told you I was going into Hogsmeade! This is so unfair!”

“Another word from you and it’ll be two weeks of detention!” Snape swept from the room, cape flaring behind him. He turned around at the exit and looked at Harry once more. “And, you’re still grounded!”

Chapter Thirty Two – Year Six; Bellatrix's Revenge

The weeks and months passed. There was no sign of Bellatrix Lestrange but Harry was sure that the woman was just biding her time. Snape must have felt the same because Harry remained confined to the Hogwarts grounds.

The days fell into a pattern and Harry had little time to worry about the escaped Death Eater. Second semester midterm exams were approaching and he spent hours studying in the common room with his friends. Actually, Harry spent very little of the time studying on his own behalf. Most of his free time, he spent tutoring a number of his fellow students (particularly Neville).

It was a warm April day when Bellatrix finally made her move. As bold as ever, she walked straight into Hogsmeade and announced to everyone that she was there. She waited patiently until Ministry Aurors tried to surround her and then set an invisible barrier around herself. They were unable to reach her and she cackled madly inside her self-imposed prison.

Holding up a vial of clear potion, she waved the flask and taunted, "Get Harry Potter here. I will tell him, and only him, where I have hidden Nathaniel Thorpe."

The Aurors, and those brave onlookers who had crept close enough to hear her, exchanged puzzled looks. Who in the world was Nathaniel Thorpe?

"Get him!" Bellatrix demanded loudly. "I am never returning to Azkaban. If I swallow this poison before he gets here," she waved her flask again, "I will take my secret to the grave."

The Aurors whispered among themselves and one was sent to fetch Dumbledore. The headmaster came at once to Hogsmeade where he cautiously approached the trapped woman. "Stop!" she called. She held the flask up to her lips. "Come any closer and I'll swallow this!"

Dumbledore halted and watched her with narrowed eyes. She smiled happily and gave a peel of laughter. "Have you discovered yet who Nathaniel Thorpe is?"

"He is a second year student at the school. No one has seen him since early this morning. What possible interest in Mr. Thorpe could you have?"

Bellatrix laughed dismissively. "I have no interest in the boy! I simply waited until a student passed close to the Forbidden Forest. He wandered near me and I took him. He is now in a place known only to me. If you wish ever to see him alive again, I want to speak with Harry Potter!"

Dumbledore turned considering eyes upon Bellatrix. The woman stood in her invisible bubble, with a wild look in her eyes. She was dirty and unkempt; she looked as if she had not bathed in months.

"I will let you speak with Harry Potter," Dumbledore said finally. His voice was low. "But, if your plan is to swap Harry for Nathaniel, I will tell you now that I will not permit it."

Bellatrix just laughed more wildly.

Dumbledore returned a short time later with Harry and Snape. Snape had reluctantly agreed to lift his restriction against Harry's leaving the Hogwarts grounds.

Harry took a step nearer to Bellatrix, and gripped his wand tightly in his hands. The woman had stopped laughing when Harry had appeared. Her eyes burned with an unholy light when she saw him and hate filled her face. "There he stands! The boy who killed the greatest wizard of them all!" she spat.

Harry ignored her and asked, "Where is Nathaniel Thorpe? You said you would tell me."

She curled her lip at him. "Do you know the boy, Potter?"

Harry shook his head. "Too bad. It would be more delicious if you did. But, no matter, Harry Potter will save him anyway, won't he?" Her voice was laced with scorn. "Little hero Potter."

Harry's fingers tightened on the wand. "Where is he?"

"He is in a place where my master once brought two other children. I thought it would be a fitting tribute to the Dark Lord for you to meet your end there."

"Do you plan on killing me, then?"

"Of course, Potter."

Snape took an involuntarily step forward and attracted Bellatrix's attention. "Traitor!" she yelled. "I would kill you with my bare hands if I could." Spittle collected at the corners of her mouth. She forced herself to calm down. "But, I must keep my eye on the prize," she spoke to herself. She shifted her eyes back to Harry.

"You see this flask, Potter?" she asked. Harry nodded. "It contains a poison, brewed especially for today. The antidote is hidden in a basin, in the middle of an island." Harry started. His movement did not go unnoticed and Bellatrix's smile widened. "You recognize the place I mean, don't you? Good. Good. I have given the boy the poison and he will die in less than an hour unless he is given the antidote. Only you can save him, Potter. Only you know where the boy is."

"What's to stop me from taking Professor Dumbledore with me to this place you mention?" asked Harry.

"I have placed additional enchantments upon the entrance. Only one wizard may enter. If more than one attempts to enter, the creatures protecting the basin will rise up and take the boy."

"Nathaniel is on the island?"

"Yes."

“You don’t want me to save him. You have arranged it so that I will not be able to succeed,” said Harry suspiciously.

Bellatrix’s eyes glowed. “The Dark Lord told me of this place once he had removed his precious treasure. He trusted me and, once he no longer needed it, he was pleased to share with me how clever his protections were. I have added nothing. It is fitting for you to die at the hands of the Dark Lord himself. You will try to take the antidote. I know you. You may even be successful in giving it to the boy. But, you will not escape from the island. You will perish there.”

“Why should I trust anything you say?” asked Harry.

“Read my mind,” she invited. “I have no secrets. I have laid the trap. Now, we will see how eagerly you take the cheese.”

Harry took her up on her offer. He pointed his wand at the Death Eater. "Legilimens!"

Yes. The boy was in the cave and the antidote was at the bottom of the basin. Harry tried to learn more information but Bellatrix abruptly cut off access to her thoughts, employing her own occlumency skill.

"That's enough," she said. "You know I'm telling the truth."

Harry pressed further. “What if I save him and return here safely? I may surprise you. What then?”

Bellatrix gave the flask she was holding another wiggle. “I will swallow this poison myself. I will have failed my master and I will not deserve to live.”

Dumbledore stepped toward Harry and began, “Harry, if you know where Bellatrix has hidden Nathaniel, tell me now.”

Harry stared at Dumbledore and, thinking quickly, realized that neither Snape nor the headmaster would ever give him permission to seek out Nathaniel on his own. Before Snape could give him a

command that he would not be able to disobey, Harry apparated away.

“No!” yelled Snape. “Potter!” But, it was too late. The boy had already left.

Bellatrix’s mad cackling filled the air.

Harry arrived at the cave he had seen before in Voldemort’s mind. He remembered vividly how angry Voldemort had been the last time he had visited here. The Dark Lord had just discovered that Regulus Black had stolen one of his horcruxes. Following in the steps of the Dark Lord, Harry floated above the pool of water that filled the crevice of the cave. Landing on the path on the other side, he muttered in parseltongue and an archway appeared. He walked swiftly along a path until he came to the submerged boat that would take him to the island glowing eerily in the middle of the dark lake. Harry averted his eyes from the water of the lake, knowing that Inferi lurked beneath.

He raised the boat, which slowly lifted from the watery depths. Shaking slightly, he climbed inside and let the boat steer itself to the island in the middle of the still lake. As he approached, he saw a figure standing in the middle of the island. It was Nathaniel Thorpe. The boy was completely white and trembling. When the boat landed, and Harry climbed out, the boy pawed at Harry’s robes. “I knew you’d come,” he said, his voice shaking. A few tears leaked down the boy’s cheeks and he brushed them away.

Harry recognized the boy now. He had never spoken to him before, but he had seen him in the hallways of Hogwarts. He was wearing a Hufflepuff scarf and Harry vaguely remembered seeing the boy on occasion sitting at the Hufflepuff house table next to Ernie Macmillan.

“It’s okay,” said Harry, soothing the boy. “I’ll get you out of here.”

The boy nodded and tried to calm down. His breath hitched in his throat and he was clearly petrified.

“I think...there are dead bodies in the water,” he whispered.

“Yes,” said Harry. “I know. Don’t look at them.”

Harry approached the bowl glowing in the middle of the little island. Yes, there it was. Under the liquid, he could see a tiny flask hidden at the bottom of the basin.

Harry took a deep breath and turned to face the boy. “Nathaniel,” he began. The boy stared intently at Harry, drinking in his every word. It was a bit disconcerting to have someone stare at him as if he held the answer to the mysteries of the universe. “Er...I need you to listen to me and to do exactly as I say.” The boy nodded vigorously. “No matter how hard it is to do it!”

The boy nodded again, this time more slowly, understanding the seriousness of Harry’s request. “Okay. Here’s what’s going to happen. I’m going to drink the potion in this basin,” said Harry. “It will refill and you must force me to drink the potion until the basin is empty. You must force me to drink it, even if I resist. Even if I beg you to stop giving it to me. Can you do that?”

Nathaniel hesitated. Harry stared at him steadily. Finally, the boy nodded his head and said, “Yes.”

“Good. When the basin is empty, take the flask inside and drink it. It contains the antidote to the poison Bellatrix gave you.”

The boy cast his eyes towards the basin and back to Harry. He nodded again. Harry continued. “Once you drink the antidote, we must leave this island. I am not sure whether I’ll be able to help much. We can both get into the boat and it will take us back to the other side of the lake. Follow the path to the exit and, once outside, I hope I can apparate us both back to Hogsmeade. If I cannot, take my wand and try to send up a distress signal.”

Nathaniel nodded but looked young and scared. Harry remembered that he had entered the Chamber of Secrets and battled the basilisk

at Nathaniel's age. He couldn't believe that he had ever been so young. "You'll be fine," he encouraged the boy. "Before you know it, we'll be back at Hogwarts and this will be a fine adventure to share with your friends."

The boy tried to smile but his lips wobbled and a few more tears leaked out. "I'm sorry," he whispered, scrubbing them away.

"There's no shame in being frightened," said Harry. "I have been scared out of my mind many, many times." At the boy's look of surprise, Harry smiled wryly. "Yeah. Just don't tell anyone. It'll ruin my image."

The boy snorted and looked marginally calmer. "Ready?" asked Harry.

Nathaniel nodded and Harry conjured up a goblet. He dipped it in the solution filling the basin, and carried it to his lips. Right before he drank, he reminded the boy one last time, "Remember. I must drink all of the potion in the basin or we will both die. You must make sure I drink it all." Nathaniel nodded, his brown eyes dark in his pale face.

Harry gulped the potion down as quickly as possible. Not waiting to give it time to affect him, he dipped the goblet again and swallowed again. Three times Harry was able to dip the goblet into the basin, filling it to the brim. The fourth time, however, his hand weakened and the goblet fell from his fingers.

Nathaniel caught the goblet before it hit the ground and dipped it into the basin. Harry turned his head to avoid drinking again, but Nathaniel said, "Please, Harry. Drink it. You know that you must."

"I don't want to!" he muttered.

"You must," said the boy firmly. Obediently, Harry swallowed and Nathaniel filled the goblet again.

Terrible images filled Harry's mind. "Please don't hurt her! Please leave her alone!" he called.

“There’s no one here, Harry,” said Nathaniel in a quiet voice. The boy lifted the goblet to Harry’s lips again. “Drink.”

Harry drank. “Oh, please leave her alone,” he begged. He began to rock back and forth and tears poured from his eyes.

Nathaniel’s hands shook as he refilled the goblet and brought it to Harry’s lips again. “She’ll be fine if you just drink this, Harry,” he said.

Harry drank quickly. “No! She’s hurt! We’re hurting her!”

Nathaniel shivered at the pain in Harry’s voice. Reluctantly, he refilled the goblet and forced the older boy to drink again. Harry had fallen to his knees.

Harry screamed. “We killed her! I wish I were dead!”

Nathaniel put the goblet to Harry’s lips again. He was crying so hard, he had a hard time seeing and almost missed Harry’s mouth.

“I am unclean!” yelled Harry. “I am not a hero! I didn’t save her! I killed her!”

Nathaniel forced himself to ignore Harry’s screams and poured the liquid into Harry’s mouth again and again. Finally, when Harry’s screams were becoming weaker and Nathaniel was sure that the other boy couldn’t swallow another mouthful, the goblet scraped the bottom of the basin.

He swiftly scooped out the flask inside and opened the stopper. Praying that this was really an antidote, Nathaniel swallowed the potion. A chill ran through his blood. He shuddered but the chill went away and he felt fine. He quickly filled the flask with a bit of the potion in the basin and put it inside his robes.

“Water. I’m thirsty,” moaned Harry.

Nathaniel turned back to Harry and knelt beside the teen, who was laying on the ground. "Harry! Come on! Let's get in the boat and get out of here!"

Harry staggered to his feet. "Thirsty," he moaned.

Nathaniel grabbed the goblet and dipped it in the lake. Taking the water back to Harry, he held to the older boy's lips so that Harry could drink. Feeling a tug on his robe, Nathaniel looked around and screamed. An Inferi had arisen from the waters and was dragging at his robes trying to pull him into the water.

Nathaniel pulled his robe out of the Inferi's grip and shouted again. He grabbed Harry's wand, which was beside the fallen teen, and shouted "Wingardium Leviosa!" It was the only spell he could think of. Immediately, the Inferi was lifted into the air, floating feet above them. Nathaniel's eyes were pulled away from the Inferi overhead by the scores of Inferi emerging from the water.

Panting in terror, he swung wildly around when he felt another tug on his robe. He almost passed out with relief when he realized it was Harry, who was returning to consciousness. "Give me the wand," Harry gasped.

Quickly, Nathaniel passed the wand back to Harry. Using the younger boy as a crutch to hold himself erect, Harry pointed the wand at the advancing Inferi. With a slash of his wand, Harry caused fire to erupt all around them. Nathaniel and Harry were in a protected circle; the fire pushed outwards, driving the Inferi back into the water.

Pulling the boy with him, Harry stumbled to the boat. They scrambled inside and made their journey back across the water. Nathaniel's gasps of fear and Harry's involuntary moans from the pain still coursing through his body were the only sounds. Once the boat hit the bank on the other side Nathaniel jumped out and reached back for Harry, to help balance the older boy as he disembarked.

Staggering, Harry leaned heavily on Nathaniel as they made their way to the exit. At Harry's hissed instructions to open, the archway reopened. Harry didn't have the energy to float above the water. The

boys plunged into the cold water, which came up to their chests, and waded across. At the edge of the cave, they climbed onto some jagged rocks.

“Hold on,” directed Harry in a weak voice. He was trembling from the cold.

Taking hold of Harry’s arm, Nathaniel gave a nod that he was ready. Harry gave a twist of his body and they apparated away from the cave.

When they appeared in Hogsmeade, they were immediately surrounded by concerned adults. Nathaniel was pulled away from Harry and put in Madam Pomfrey’s care. Dumbledore bent over Harry, who had fallen to his knees again. “Harry. What happened? How can we help you?” the headmaster asked, his voice urgent.

“I had to drink some sort of potion,” gasped Harry. “It made me relive a horrible memory, but I’m okay,” he said.

“You are not okay,” snapped Snape. The older man was kneeling at Harry’s side. “Who knows what harm that potion caused. Describe it to me exactly!”

“Sir,” interrupted Nathaniel. He had pushed away from Madame Pomfrey. He held out a flask, which he had hidden in his robes. “Here’s a sample of the potion. I put it in the flask that held the antidote to the poison Lestrage gave me. I wasn’t sure if it would be important to know what the potion was.”

“That was good thinking, Mr. Thorpe,” praised Dumbledore.

Snape took the flask and, unstoppering it, sniffed at its contents. “I will take this back to the castle immediately. I must know what this contains.”

“I will take care of Harry,” promised Dumbledore.

Looking reluctant to leave the weak boy, Snape nodded in agreement and set off quickly for the castle.

Nathaniel knelt at Harry's side. "Thank you, Harry," he whispered. "You saved my life."

Harry smiled weakly. "You did well, Nathaniel. You were brave. You should be in Gryffindor."

The boy laughed shakily. "I don't think my nerves could handle it!"

Harry struggled to rise and Dumbledore and Nathaniel helped support him. "Let's get you back to the castle, Harry," said Dumbledore. "You can rest in the hospital wing while Severus is identifying the potion ingredients."

Harry nodded but, before he could leave, his eyes fell on Bellatrix. The Death Eater was still in her protective bubble, watching him with eyes full of hate.

He stumbled toward her. "You see, Bellatrix," Harry gasped. "You have lost. Again! We were able to escape Voldemort's trap."

Her eyes flared at his mention of Voldemort's name. "You are not worthy to speak his name!" she hissed.

She quickly swallowed a mouthful of the poison in the flask she held. Harry gasped. She cackled again, enjoying his shock. "I will not return to Azkaban. I have tried to avenge my lord. I have failed and deserve to die." Her voice dropped lower and she approached the edge of her protective barrier.

"You deserve to die too, you know." Her voice was soft and almost crooning. Harry's eyes fixed on her and he was unable to look away. He felt as if he were drowning in the dark pools of her eyes. She nodded slowly. "You are unloved, unwanted and unclean." The words hit Harry with tremendous force. He staggered a step backwards. "You know I'm telling the truth." Her voice was as sweet as a lover's. In the background, Harry thought he heard other voices telling him

not to listen, but he could only hear Bellatrix. “No one will ever love you. You will always be alone. You are unclean. They all think you are a hero. But, we know better, don’t we?”

The protective barrier separating Bellatrix from Harry disappeared. She held out the flask in her hand, offering it to Harry. In a trance, he reached out and took it. “Drink,” she urged.

Bellatrix’s hypnotic spell muted even the strength of the indenture’s compulsion not to harm the body that was pledged in service to another. Harry lifted the flask to his lips. Boom! It exploded in his hands. Glass flew in all directions and Harry was jolted out of his daze.

Dumbledore had shattered the flask. Looking more furious than Harry ever remembered seeing him, the headmaster waved his wand again and strong ropes flew through the air encircling Bellatrix. “Silencio!” he yelled, and Bellatrix was finally silent.

But, she had done her damage, dropping poisoned barbs into Harry’s mind, weakened by the potion he had taken. Harry dropped to his knees. Dumbledore knelt beside him again and, speaking in a low but urgent voice, said, “Don’t believe her, Harry! Everything she said is a lie!”

Harry looked at the headmaster with dull eyes. “It’s not a lie. It’s the truth!”

“It’s not true! You are wanted. You are loved. You are not unclean. Your soul shines like the brightest star.”

Harry shook his head, rejecting what Dumbledore was saying. “You don’t know. You don’t understand. She’s right. I am not a hero. You don’t know all the people I couldn’t save. All the people we hurt because I didn’t stop Voldemort soon enough.”

“That’s not your fault, Harry! You didn’t hurt anyone. Voldemort is to blame for his own actions. If you hadn’t stopped him when you did, he would have killed far more.”

“It was me!” insisted Harry. “I was inside his head. I did it too!”

“No! You didn’t!”

Remembering the vivid memory that the potion in the cave had just made him relive, Harry’s voice dropped and he spoke as if to himself. “I remember one woman. She begged us to leave her alone. But we hurt her. We killed her.”

“No!” said Dumbledore sharply. “You did not hurt her! You did not kill her!”

“Professor,” interrupted Nathaniel, who had been listening in horror to the exchange. “This is what Harry said while drinking the potion. This is the memory that he had in the cave.”

Dumbledore nodded in understanding. “Harry! That potion must have made you susceptible to hypnotic suggestion. Bellatrix knew this, as she must have known that the potion you drank in the cave brought back a terrible memory. She’s playing with your darkest fears and insecurities. Don’t let her win, Harry.”

“We raped her.” The blunt words fell from Harry’s lips.

Dumbledore drew back in shock. “What?”

“We raped the muggle woman,” repeated Harry. “I couldn’t save her. We hurt her. Then, we killed her. I am unclean.”

Finally, Dumbledore realized just what damage Voldemort had done to the boy. “Oh, Harry,” he said, sadly. He drew the teen into his arms and hugged him. Harry looked shocked and searched the headmaster’s eyes for the disgust he was sure he would find.

“You are not unclean,” Dumbledore assured the boy, his voice shaking. A tear spilled down the old man’s cheek. “You are as much a victim as that poor woman who Voldemort hurt and killed. If you could have, I know that you would have saved her. You must accept

that you cannot save everyone and you must forgive yourself when you fail. I think that this will be the hardest lesson of all for you.”

Harry started to cry silently. “I see her face in my dreams. I hear her screams,” he admitted. “I see other faces too, but hers is the worst.”

“Will you let us help you? Will you let us soften that memory for you? It’s the memory behind the locked door in your mind, isn’t it?”

“Oh, you know about the locked door?” asked Harry sheepishly.

Dumbledore nodded. Harry thought for a moment and then nodded. “Yes,” he said finally. “I will open the door. I don’t want Voldemort to win. I want to believe you. His memories...my memories... are like a poison running through me. I don’t want to feel unclean anymore.”

Dumbledore helped Harry to rise again. Deliberately, he shielded Harry so that the teen could not see Bellatrix. The poison the Death Eater had swallowed was taking effect and her struggles against the bonds holding her were becoming weaker. As Harry was led away, back to the castle, Nathaniel and Madame Pomfrey bringing up the rear, Bellatrix stopped twitching at last. Approaching her cautiously, the Aurors poked at her with their wands. They breathed a sigh of relief when she did not respond. The wicked witch was dead.

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Chapter Thirty Three – Year Six; Summer Arrives

“You’re going to have to stop doing such amazing heroics, Harry, if you don’t want to be in the paper so often,” advised Hermione.

Hermione had just finished reading the Daily Prophet’s article recounting yesterday’s Harry’s rescue of Nathaniel Thorpe and Bellatrix Lestrangle’s death.

Harry ignored her. He gave a small wave to Nathaniel, who was waving at him from the Hufflepuff table. While the students eagerly devoured the story in the Daily Prophet, they had already heard about yesterday’s events from Nathaniel himself. Harry was relieved that the younger boy had the sense to keep some matters private; Nathaniel hadn’t shared with anyone Harry’s confession about the memory he had been forced to relive in the cave.

Ron took a bite a toast and, speaking with his mouth full, asked, “Do you want to practice some Quidditch today? The weather’s going to be nice.”

Harry looked glum. “Can’t. Have detention.”

“Detention? Since when? How come?”

“Since last night. Once Snape was sure that the potion I drank wasn’t going to have any lasting effects on me, he decided I needed to be taught a lesson. He gave me two weeks’ worth of detention. If it’s anything like last time, I’ll be washing cauldrons without magic.”

“What a git!” uttered Ron loyally.

“Ron!” scolded Hermione. But she turned to Harry and asked, “But, why is Snape giving you detention? I don’t understand.”

“He said that I left Hogsmeade yesterday knowing that he wouldn’t have wanted me to go. He said that I have to stop acting without thinking. In his words, ‘You need some more Slytherin in you, Potter.

You are entirely too Gryffindor and I will break you of this habit, before it kills you.”

“What did he want you to do?” asked Ron. “Let Thorpe die?”

“No. He said that I’m not the only one in the world who can save people. He said that Dumbledore would have been able to rescue Thorpe if I had just told Dumbledore where the cave was.”

“Oh,” said Ron.

Harry continued. “Anyway, Snape says that at least when I’m in detention, he knows where I am. He told me that if something like this happens again, I’ll be in detention until the indenture is over.”

Hermione looked sympathetic but Ron just tsked. “Well, that’s no worry, then. How likely is it that a crazy Death Eater will escape from Azkaban and try to kill you?”

There was a silence for a minute and then Ron said, “Actually, Harry, maybe you had better slow down and think next time.”

Harry just grinned.

The school term drew to a close. Harry did well on his exams. In some, like Transfiguration, he was so advanced that the test was just a formality. Draco’s exam was the hardest. Harry couldn’t believe how much there was to learn about wizarding rules and protocol. In addition to the written exam, Draco forced Harry to attend a formal dinner meeting. It was torture but Harry acquitted himself well enough for Draco to award him an “A” – Acceptable.

Sadly, Harry waved goodbye to his friends for the summer. He resigned himself to a boring summer. He would be staying at Hogwarts for another week, although the school was empty of students. Then, he would be accompanying Snape to the potion

master's home for the summer. Snape had already made clear that he expected Harry to keep up with his studies during the summer.

Harry had made Ron laugh by swearing that he would prefer to return to cleaning tables in the muggle restaurant where he had spent his teenage summers.

Despite Harry's trepidation, the summer was not too boring after all. Snape dragged Harry with him as he collected his potion ingredients throughout the summer. These trips were usually very interesting, as the ingredients Snape sought were not found in Diagon Alley. Rather, they wandered through some seedy parts of Knockturn Alley and even visited some dark alleys in Bulgaria and Albania.

One night in mid summer, he and Snape attended a formal party at the Ministry. Harry had not realized it was a birthday party to celebrate his turning seventeen until after he had arrived. Harry's eyes goggled as he took in the birthday decorations. "Happy Birthday, Harry!" banners hung down the walls.

Of course, Scrimgeour and Dumbledore were there. But, so were a number of Harry's friends who came from wizarding families, such as Ron, Neville and Draco. "Wow!" breathed Harry, looking around in delight.

"It's not every day the savior of the wizarding world comes of age," drawled Draco.

Harry rolled his eyes. "I bet you had a fancy party too, Draco."

Draco looked surprised as he said matter-of-factly, "Of course I did."

Harry hid his smile. Draco's arrogance was amusing when it wasn't so irritating.

When Dumbledore handed Harry a gaily wrapped present, Harry was taken aback. He had never considered that he might receive gifts for his birthday. He had never received birthday gifts before.

He wasn't sure he wanted to accept any present from Dumbledore. But, the wrapping was so pretty; he couldn't bear to refuse the gift. Harry turned the package over in his hands, wishing he didn't have to disturb the wrapping. Finally, he carefully opened the present and took out the pair of socks inside. They were black with little red snitches flying around. They were kind of cool, Harry thought to himself. "Thank you," he said politely.

"You are welcome, Harry," Dumbledore smiled. Watching the teen, Dumbledore wished that he could have given him a far fancier present. The boy deserved it. But, the headmaster knew that Harry would not be willing to accept an expensive gift from him. It would have seemed too much like bribery – as if the headmaster were trying to buy Harry's forgiveness. Dumbledore sighed internally. If only it were that easy.

Soon the boy had unwrapped a pile of gifts, ranging from the expensive crystal set given by the Malfoys, and the jewel encrusted medal of Merlin given by the Minister, to the more modest broom-servicing kit from the Weasleys and the subscription to Quidditch for the Serious Fan from the Longbottoms. While Harry thanked everyone politely, Dumbledore suspected that he preferred the less expensive, but more thoughtful, gifts given by Ron and Neville.

Everyone was curious to see what Professor Snape had given the boy. When Harry opened the package and took out a small bottle, he wasn't sure what it was. "Thank you, sir," he said courteously.

"It's a memory, Potter," explained Snape. "You will need a pensieve to view it. I am sure that the headmaster will let you borrow his if you ask politely."

"Oh. Thank you, sir," repeated Harry, still unsure about the gift.

"What memory is it, sir?" asked Ron.

Snape looked like he would prefer not to answer but, with all eyes on him, he grudgingly said, "It's a memory of Harry's mother."

“What?” breathed Harry. He looked back at the bottle, this time eyeing it as if it were gold.

“You know that I knew your mother as a child, Potter. I have selected this memory of her for you to see. I believe you will find it enjoyable and I believe Lily would be pleased that I have shared it with you.”

“Thank you, sir,” repeated Harry. This time his voice rang with sincerity.

Snape inclined his head graciously.

“That was generous, Severus,” said Dumbledore, when they were able to exchange some words alone.

“Surprised you, have I?” said Snape with a bite in his voice.

“A bit,” admitted Dumbledore. “You appear to have become fond of the boy.”

“I have not,” the potions master lied. “It’s unfortunate that he looks so much like his father. Still, it is Lily’s spirit and heart that I see shining from the boy. There are times he looks at me with her eyes and I swear it’s her looking at me. While I may not like the boy, I am sure that Lily is pleased that I am watching over him.”

Dumbledore smiled at Snape’s determined refusal to admit he cared for the boy. He turned the subject, saying, “Harry seems happy today.”

“The medical treatments are starting to have an effect. He is not as burdened with memories as he was and he is usually able to sleep without nightmares.”

“It will be interesting to see how he manages his final year at Hogwarts. Let’s see if he can avoid finding trouble.”

“I’ll be keeping a close eye on him,” promised Snape. “Just because he’s of age doesn’t mean that he’ll be permitted to run wild. He is far too impulsive and headstrong.” He cast a sideways look at the headmaster. “The Gryffindor in him, no doubt.”

Dumbledore smiled. The men continued to watch Harry, pleased that the boy was enjoying himself.

The headmaster mused aloud, “One more year. In a year’s time, the indenture will be over. What will he do then?”

“What do you mean?”

“I sometimes wonder whether he’ll return to the muggle world.”

Snape cast an alarmed look at Dumbledore. “You can’t be serious!”

“It’s hard to know what the boy will do,” admitted Dumbledore. At least, he won’t be suffering from depression if he does elect to leave us this time.”

“Dumbledore! He can’t leave the wizarding world! That can’t be permitted.”

Dumbledore looked at Snape in surprise. “Once he is no longer bound by the indenture, we could not prevent him. But, there is no reason to look concerned, Severus. Harry may very well decide to stay. Anyway, I didn’t think you’d care.”

“I don’t!” said Snape, hastily. “It’s just that Scrimgeour was right. Harry belongs to this world. He shouldn’t be living among muggles.”

“It’ll be his choice,” said Dumbledore softly.

Looking dissatisfied, Snape gazed back at the boy. Was it really possible that Harry might leave the wizarding world? “Lily wouldn’t want him to leave our world,” he pointed out.

“Is it Lily who wouldn’t want him to leave or you, Severus?”

Snape glared at the headmaster and turned away, refusing to answer.

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The Daily Prophet article the next day caused Harry to want to hide under his bed in embarrassment. Under a picture of him holding a goblet of pumpkin juice that had been deliberately tinted by the paper to look like firewhisky, ran the headline, "Wizard's Most Eligible Bachelor Turns of Age". The article went on to describe Harry's birthday party in detail. A number of guests at the party had been happy to give interviews and describe everything Harry had said and done. Scrimgeour himself was quoted extensively. He had wanted to show the wizarding world that Harry was happy and doing well.

However, the part that made Harry want to curl up in shame was being named as the most eligible bachelor in the wizarding world and the blatant speculation as to whether he had a girlfriend.

When Snape entered the room and asked Harry if he wished to accompany him to Diagon Alley, Harry lifted miserable eyes and announced that he would sooner die.

Startled, Snape asked in shock, "What's the matter?"

"Did you read the paper today?"

"Yes," admitted Snape.

"Did you see what they said about me?"

Snape rolled his eyes. "Are you telling me that you are embarrassed because of some ridiculous article in the paper?"

"They said I was the most eligible bachelor! They listed me as the sexiest wizard in the U.K.! How am I ever going to face my friends again?"

“I guess now would not be the time to tell you that I had planned to have us meet up with Draco for lunch.”

“Draco! Never! Can you imagine what he’ll say to me about this article! I am never leaving this house!”

“If Draco says anything to you, it would be sour grapes. He was named the most eligible bachelor when he turned seventeen.”

“Really?” Harry felt marginally better. “How about sexiest wizard?” he asked hopefully.

“Maybe not. Why don’t you ask him?”

Harry looked at Snape suspiciously. “Are you making fun of me?” he demanded.

Snape narrowed his eyes. “Am I known for my sense of humor?” he asked.

“No,” admitted Harry. But, it wasn’t until later, when he replayed the conversation in his head, that he realized that Snape hadn’t answered his question.

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Harry relented and joined Snape in Diagon Alley later that day. He wore a hooded cape but a number of people guessed who he was anyway. He thanked people for their birthday wishes and pretended to find it amusing (rather than completing mortifying) when they teased him over being named most eligible bachelor and sexiest wizard.

After yet another such encounter, Harry muttered, “Why couldn’t I be invisible?”

Snape took the question seriously. “Actually, Harry, you could be. Why not use a glamour charm, as you did with ‘Mark Twist’? No one would need to know who you are.”

“No!” said Harry definitively. “I promised myself that I will never do that again. I am who I am, like it or not. I am not going to pretend to be someone else ever again. Voldemort stole too much from me. I won’t let him steal my identity.”

The potions master had not realized until then how bitter Harry was to have had to live his life incognito for so many years. Snape nodded in understanding. Just then, they were hailed by Draco, who was sitting at an outdoor table waiting for them to arrive.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the wizarding world’s most eligible bachelor!” he called.

Harry turned red and turned to Snape. “You see! What did I tell you!”

He strode over to the table and angrily grabbed a chair to sit down. “Don’t start!” he warned Draco. “I am now seventeen and able to use magic. I swear I won’t hesitate to use it if you piss me off!”

Draco put on an innocent face. “My! Someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed. What did I say? Was it my comment that you are the most eligible bachelor? Should I have said that you were the sexiest wizard instead? I apologize.”

Harry bared his teeth and growled.

“Enough!” said Snape. The two subsided but Harry felt that Draco’s smirk was still taunting him. Under the table, he stomped on Draco’s foot. (Snape’s command was not sufficiently clear to cause the indenture to stop him.)

“I saw that, Potter!” said Snape. “I said ‘enough’. When we return home, you will write 100 times that you are the most eligible bachelor in the wizarding world.”

“Sir!” Harry gasped, betrayed.

“If you continue to disobey me, you will write 100 times that you are the sexiest wizard.”

Harry’s mouth dropped open. Draco snickered. “Mr. Malfoy,” cautioned Snape. “I would hate to have to inform your father that you were not a gracious guest.”

Draco immediately sobered. “I am sorry, sir.”

This time, Harry smirked.

The rest of the lunch passed amicably enough. Just as they were getting ready to leave, Snape was greeted by a man who Harry didn’t know. Apparently, the gentleman, Edgar Tiles, knew Snape from their mutual interest in brewing potions. Edgar shook Harry’s hand eagerly when introduced.

After exchanging a few pleasantries, the man said, “I know it’s a bit of an imposition, but would you mind saying hello to my little girl?” He gestured toward a child standing impatiently across the street. The girl looked to be about five years’ old and her mother was holding her hand firmly to prevent the child from darting across the road toward them. “She’s a real fan of yours, Harry, and it would mean a lot to her if you would say hi.”

Harry nodded, although he wasn’t too pleased. He was all too aware of Draco listening and knew that the other boy would be gathering up ammunition to tease him later. At Edgar’s signal, the woman leaned over and spoke to the little girl. She must have told the child that Harry had agreed to meet her because the kid immediately started bouncing up and down on her feet, and pulling impatiently at her mother’s hand. The child half-dragged her mother across the street.

When they reached Harry, the woman politely shook his hand and thanked him for agreeing to meet them. Harry thought that, at least, this family was far more polite than most. They asked his permission before just trying to accost him. Crouching down, Harry smiled at the little girl, who had become suddenly shy.

“Hello,” he said softly. The child buried her face in her mother’s robes. “What’s your name?” he asked.

A muffled response followed. Harry looked up at the father, who obediently repeated, “Gloria.”

“Hello, Gloria,” Harry said. “I understand you wanted to say hello. Please don’t be shy. I promise not to eat you.”

The little girl giggled and pulled her head out of her mother’s robes. “I know you won’t eat me, silly!” she said. “You’re Harry Potter. You protect people. You would save me from anyone trying to eat me.”

Harry blushed but he nodded. “Yes, I would,” he admitted.

The mother nudged the child to say hello. Harry held out his hand, but the child ignored it. Instead, in a rush, she flung herself at Harry, almost knocking him over. Her thin arms wrapped themselves around his neck and she hugged him tightly. She gave him a wet, noisy buss on the cheek. “Happy birthday, Harry!” she said, stepping away.

Harry lifted a hand to his cheek. His eyes shone. “Gloria,” he said. “You know that they say you always remember your first kiss. I will always remember you.”

Harry didn’t notice the adults exchanging surprised looks. Harry’s first kiss?

The little girl whispered something. Harry leaned forward and asked, “What was that?”

She moved closer and whispered in his ear. “Will you marry me?”

Harry let out an involuntarily laugh that he tried to disguise as a cough. “Don’t you think you’re a little young?” he asked.

“But they say that you are an ‘ele gerbel bat ler’ now!” she wailed. “If I wait, someone else will marry you!”

Harry blushed. "Don't worry," said Harry. "Only the luckiest man will marry you."

She flung herself at him to hug him again. Harry's arms tightened instinctively on the child, holding her close. She was so soft and sweet smelling. Her hug was like phoenix song. The most wonderful glow seemed to start in the pit of his stomach and spread a warm trail throughout his body. When the child stepped back, Harry reluctantly released her. His arms felt empty.

"Thank you, Harry," said the mother gratefully.

"The pleasure was all mine," said the boy, his voice thick with emotion.

When the family left, and Snape had stepped away for a moment to pay for their lunch, Draco eyed Harry assessingly. "Your first kiss, Potter?"

Harry stiffened. Was Draco going to tease him? Hunching his shoulders defensively, Harry said, "It's not as if I had a happy home life! No parents around to kiss my boo-boos!"

"I guess I never really thought about what that meant," Draco admitted. His usual mocking tone was missing from his voice. "You really did have a crap life, didn't you? Even apart from You Know Who."

Harry snorted. "Yeah! I know."

Snape returned and the boys made their way to Flourish and Blotts, where Harry picked up some more books to read over the summer break. Harry would have been alarmed if he had known what Draco was thinking.

Draco had been raised by a doting mother. While Lucius Malfoy was demanding and difficult to please, Draco had never doubted that he was loved by his father. It came as a shock to realize that Harry

Potter, the Golden Boy, for all that the wizarding world fawned all over him, had no one to give him loving attention.

Draco came to a decision. He knew what Harry needed. It was clear that the Boy Who Lived needed a girlfriend. He, Draco, would keep an eye out, and take a look at the possible choices for Harry. The other boy might have made the sexiest wizard list but Draco was sure that Harry was inexperienced when it came to the opposite sex.

Harry was blithely unaware of Draco's plans for him. He enjoyed a pleasant half hour wandering through the store. He even permitted himself to splurge on a beautifully bound book of charms as a birthday gift to himself.

As they left the store, Harry saw Fred and George Weasley in the distance. Leaving Draco and Snape to meet him at Madam Malkin's, where Draco wanted to view fabric for some new robes, Harry ran over to greet the twins. He had not seen them since their ill-fated attempt to rescue him from prison. "Fred! George!" he called excitedly.

The twins grinned widely when they saw him. "Harry!" they called happily, and slapped him on the back in greeting. "It's great to see you! You kicked butt, big time, Harry! We know everyone tells you, but we need to say it too. Thanks for killing the evil dude!" said Fred.

"We can't believe we knew you when you were just lowly 'Mark Twist,' pariah," commented George.

"You may be famous Harry Potter now but you're still scrawny," observed Fred.

Harry grinned at the teasing. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

"We're looking for premises for Weasley's Wizard Wheezes," explained George. "It's a joke shop that we want to open."

"I remember. Ron mentioned months ago that you wanted to open a joke store."

Fred and George nodded. "We've been working at Gringott's on a temporary basis to earn some money," said Fred. "We've got some money saved and we were hoping it would be enough to rent a shop above Eeylops Owl Emporium."

"But," said George bitterly, "the landlord wants a security deposit in addition to the first month's rent in advance. He seems to think that there's a risk that we might damage the shop. Can you believe?"

Harry could well believe. Fred and George's inventions often involved explosions of varying degrees of strength. He made a noncommittal sound.

"Anyway, we'll have to save a bit more in order to afford a deposit."

"It's not the greatest location," admitted Fred. "We'll have to start small. But, we're sure that we'll be able to grow quickly once we get started."

Harry looked around to make sure that they couldn't be overheard. "I've got a great idea! I can lend you the money to start the shop!"

"What do you mean?" demanded Fred.

"I just turned seventeen."

"Yeah. We heard," said George. He and Fred exchanged smiles.

"Don't start!" cautioned Harry, knowing what they were going to say. He continued quickly, to forestall the teasing, "I'm in charge of my finances now. Or, at least, most of the principal. I think some of it might be tied up in trusts until I'm 25. Anyway, I could make you a loan of the money to start the joke shop. You can repay me from the profits."

Fred and George stopped smiling. They looked very earnest now. "Are you serious, Harry?" they asked in unison.

Harry nodded. Then, he looked around again to doublecheck that no one was listening. "Let's not tell Snape though. I'm not sure he'd agree with this."

"Can you do this without his permission?" asked Fred.

"I'll just send instructions directly to Gringotts. Snape hasn't chosen to exercise any control over my finances. He could tell me not to invest in the shop if he wanted to. You know, because of the indenture. But, what he doesn't know won't hurt him!"

Fred and George let out a loud whoop. "This is phenomenal, Harry! Let's go right in and rent the place."

"Wait!" said Harry. The twins stopped and looked worried that their dream was about to be dashed before it had even begun. "That's not the place for you," scorned Harry. "If I'm going to bankroll this project, I want it to be a success. You've got to spend money to make money! When Weasley's Wizard Wheezes opens, it needs to be in a premier location in Diagon Alley. It needs to be visible and attract plenty of foot traffic."

George looked at Harry consideringly, "You sound like you know something about business strategy."

"Draco's lessons are coming in handy."

"Draco? Draco Malfoy? He's been teaching you?"

"Well, he considers it his responsibility to single-handedly teach me how to take my rightful place as head of one of the oldest wizarding families." Harry rolled his eyes. "This has involved learning some financial planning. It's pretty boring."

Fred shrugged. "You might think it's boring, but it appears to be sinking in. Although I'm not sure any financial advisor would recommend your investing in us."

“I don’t know why not. I have every faith that you will do well. I already know from first hand experience that you are both very skilled wizards and that your talents lie in the making people laugh.”

The twins looked more excited by the moment. “Harry, are you really sure?”

Harry nodded. “About this? Completely sure! The world needs more jokes.”

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Chapter Thirty Four – Year Seven; Ginny

Harry settled smoothly into his seventh and final year at Hogwarts. He enjoyed meeting up with old friends. He had missed Ron and Hermione a lot but, in truth, he found his attention caught the most by Ginny.

Over the summer, Ginny seemed to have become even more beautiful, if that were possible. Harry tried to stop staring at her, but his eyes seemed to be drawn to her involuntarily. One day, at breakfast, Harry felt eyes watching him and turned to see Draco giving him a knowing smirk. He tried to look innocent but Draco raised a disbelieving eyebrow. Harry blushed.

When breakfast was over, Harry felt a presence standing at his shoulder. He knew who he would see before he turned around. Sure enough, it was Draco. Had he come to tease him? He had better not do it in front of Ginny! With this thought in mind, Harry faced Draco with a belligerent expression. “What do you want?” he asked roughly.

Ron and Hermione looked surprised. Harry was seldom so rude. Draco lifted a haughty eyebrow again. “Come with me, Potter,” he demanded.

“Why?” asked Harry suspiciously.

“Do you want me to explain here – in front of everyone?” Draco asked in a soft but threatening tone.

Harry’s lips tightened and he got to his feet. Reluctantly, he followed Draco from the Great Hall. The blond led him through the grounds until they came to the Dark Lake. They did not speak for a while but watched the water rippling in the distance where the Giant Squid was on the move.

Finally, Draco spoke. “I noticed you mooning over Ginny Weasley. How come you don’t ask her out? You know she’d go.” Out of habit, he teased, “I know she’s Weasel’s sister but you, out of everyone, would be willing to overlook that.”

“It’s none of your business, Draco,” Harry responded angrily.

Draco did not react to Harry’s anger. “Maybe not. But, I’m asking,” he said calmly.

“Have you ever thought maybe I don’t want a girlfriend?”

“Not the way you look at her, Potter. You want a girlfriend all right. You want Ginny Weasley!”

Harry blushed. Harry turned to look out over the Dark Lake. He hesitated. He was not used to confiding in anyone. But, perhaps Draco was the only one who could understand. After all, the blond had suffered under Voldemort too. Taking a deep breath, he whispered, “You know what he was. You know what he did. There are things I did when I was with him...”

Draco tried to understand. “What does You Know Who have to do with anything?” When Harry didn’t respond, Draco cast his mind around for an explanation. He was struck by a sudden thought. “I heard stories of a muggle woman You Know Who hurt once in that way,” Draco said softly. He watched Harry closely.

Harry nodded, closed his eyes and swallowed. “I hurt that woman!”

“That wasn’t you.”

Harry opened his eyes and turned to face Draco. “But, it feels like it was,” Harry admitted. It was a relief to finally say it aloud. Snape and Healer Ainsley, after many long and painful treatments, had been successful in prying this memory from the “walls” in his mind. However, a large dark shadow, covering almost the entirety of a room in Harry’s mind, had remained and would always be there. While the memory of the muggle woman’s face had been blurred and her screams muted, Harry would never be able to forget what had happened.

Harry turned to look back over the Lake as he admitted, "I can't believe I'm thinking about having a girlfriend, when that poor woman..." His voice trailed off.

Draco looked at him consideringly. "Do you think I deserved Azkaban, Potter?"

"No!" said Harry, surprised at the question.

"But I did cruel things, Harry. I chose to be a Death Eater. You saw me...I crucio'ed my father. I stood by while Voldemort murdered Professor Burbage."

"You didn't realize what you were getting into. Voldemort forced you to hurt your father. You couldn't have saved Professor Burbage. And you turned away from Voldemort when you could."

"So, I am forgiven?"

"Yes," said Harry forcefully.

"But, you're better than me?"

"I never said that!" Harry said angrily.

"No, but you hold yourself to a higher standard. You don't forgive yourself even though you actually didn't even do anything."

Harry was silent. Then, so quietly, Draco had to strain to hear him, Harry said, "It's not really that I feel guilty. I know, at least with my head, that it wasn't my fault. But...it seems so frightening."

How had he gotten himself into this conversation? Draco asked himself. He was silent for a moment and then, fighting off his embarrassment, tried to advise the other boy. "It's not always like that, Harry."

Harry looked at Draco in surprise. Draco never called him Harry.

Draco was gazing at him with understanding and sympathy. "It doesn't have to be humiliating or painful. It's meant to be...beautiful."

Harry was surprised that Draco held such a romantic view. He looked at him curiously. "Have you ever?"

Draco smiled. "Yes, Potter. I have."

"Really? Who with?" he asked curiously, distracted.

Draco lifted an eyebrow in his usual haughty manner. "A gentleman never tells."

"Oh," said Harry, abashed. He looked out over the Dark Lake again.

"Is this why you won't go out with Ginny?" Draco pressed.

"I don't want to hurt her," Harry muttered.

Draco was unsure what to say. Still, he pressed on. "Whatever you feel you did while living inside him, it wasn't you. You wouldn't behave that way. Stop worrying. When the time is right, and with the right girl, it won't seem frightening. Besides, you're only seventeen. You don't have to worry about...that for a long time."

"You already did it!" Harry protested.

"That was me, Potter. It wouldn't surprise me if you waited until your wedding day."

"What's wrong with that?" the other boy muttered, embarrassed.

"Nothing," Draco smiled. "Then again, Ginny may not let you wait. She thinks you're hot."

Harry snorted. "Right!"

"Potter, at times you're so clueless, it's annoying."

Harry looked confused. Draco shook his head tiredly. "Just ask her out, Potter."

In the week that followed, Harry tried to ask Ginny out on numerous occasions but kept losing his nerve. The time never seemed right. There was always someone else around or Ginny seemed to be worrying about classwork or Harry couldn't find the words.

Harry knew that Draco was becoming impatient. "I swear I'll tell her myself if you don't get a move on, Potter!" Draco told him irritably after class one day.

"I'll get around to asking her! Anyway, it's none of your business!" protested Harry. "Why do you care if I ask her out?"

"Because someone has to take you in hand. I wouldn't put it past you to end up with a muggle. At least Ginny Weasley's a pureblood. 'Harry Potter' should set an example."

"Draco, that's a terrible thing to say! Didn't you learn anything about not being so prejudiced?! I don't care about her blood status. You make me wish Ginny was a muggle!"

"But, she's not," said Draco with satisfaction. "Besides, someone has to help you out! You may have defeated You Know Who but you are helpless when it comes to your love life!"

"What are you two talking about?" asked Ron, joining the two. He had been wondering for days what Draco had wanted to speak privately about with Harry.

Harry turned red and muttered, "Nothing."

Draco looked consideringly at Ron, though. It was clear he was wondering whether he should enlist Ron's help.

Harry's eyes widened in alarm. This was Ginny's brother! Desperately, he seized Ron's arm and tried to steer him away from Draco. "Let's go!" he said. "You wanted to play some wizards' chess. How about we set up a game right now?"

Ron looked more suspicious than ever and pulled his arm out of Harry's grip. "What are you hiding?" demanded the redhead.

"Nothing!"

"Harry likes your sister and wants to ask her out but doesn't have the nerve," said Draco.

Harry glared at Draco, promising retaliation with his eyes. Ron, meanwhile, was taken aback. Whatever he had been expecting Harry or Draco to say, it wasn't this. Sure, he had sometimes imagined how it would be if Harry dated his sister but he hadn't realized that Harry really did like Ginny. Although now he thought about it, Harry did seem tongue-tied around Ginny a lot.

"Cool!" said Ron.

"Cool?" repeated Harry. "You...you don't mind?"

"Mind? Why would I mind? You're my best friend and I think you and Ginny would make a good couple. Just watch out for her temper!"

Harry grinned, relieved that Ron wasn't angry at him.

Ron continued, "Just think, if you marry her, you'll be my brother!"

Harry's eyes widened in alarm again. "Who said anything about marriage?" he asked.

Ron laughed. "Wedding bells are in the air," he teased.

Draco threw cold water on the conversation. "There's one problem with this scene of domestic bliss," drawled the other boy. "Harry's too scared to ask her out."

“I am not scared,” Harry objected. “I’m just...”

When he hesitated, Draco filled in the word again, “Scared.”

Harry glared at the blond.

“I know she likes you, Harry,” said Ron.

“Really? Did she say something?”

Draco rolled his eyes. “How old are you, Potter? Eight? Can’t you read the signs at all? She’s tried to catch your attention all last year.”

“Really?” Harry asked again, surprised. It would be great if it were true, but maybe Draco and Ron were mistaken.

Draco threw up his hands. “I can’t take it anymore! Weasel, you go ask your sister if she wants to go out with Potter.”

“No!” said Harry. “I’ll do it!”

Draco threw him a doubting look. “I will!” Harry insisted.

“When?” Draco demanded.

“Tonight,” Harry promised rashly.

Draco threw one last suspicious look his way. “You had better, Potter. If you don’t, this time tomorrow, I’m putting up a big heart in the Great Hall with a picture of you and Ginny in it.”

“You wouldn’t dare!”

“Oh, yes, I would!”

With this threat looming over him, Harry cautiously approached Ginny in the common room that night. It was awkward with Ron watching

him, a knowing smirk on his mouth. Hermione looked up from the book she was reading. A small smile touched her lips as well.

Ginny was sitting at a table surrounded by some of her friends, writing an essay for Transfiguration. She looked up when Harry cleared his throat.

“Hi, Harry,” she smiled pleasantly.

“Er...hi, Ginny.” He was silent and she looked at him in puzzlement.

“Was there something you wanted, Harry?”

“No. I mean...yes. Er....can I speak with you a minute?”

One of the girls at the table giggled and Harry turned red. Ginny, with dawning understanding, started to redden herself. Sounding slightly breathless, she rose from her seat and said, “Sure, Harry. Do you want to take a walk?”

“Yes!” gasped Harry gratefully.

It was incredibly embarrassing. The common room fell silent as the pair walked to the portrait hole. Out of the corner of his eye, Harry saw a few of the students nudging each other with their elbows and grinning knowingly. It was a relief to leave the Gryffindor common room and stand with Ginny in the empty hallway.

Staring at her, Harry’s mind went blank. “Do you want to take a walk to the Quidditch pitch?” she asked.

Harry seized on the suggestion. “Yes! That sounds perfect.”

In silence, they walked to the pitch. Trying to put Harry at ease, Ginny began speaking about Quidditch. “I hope you join the team this year, Harry. You are such a fabulous player.”

“I think I’ll give it a pass,” said Harry. “I don’t want to attract any more attention than I already do.”

“I’m not sure Professor McGonagall will ever forgive you,” Ginny teased.

Harry smiled. More relaxed, he cast her a sideways look. “Ginny,” he began, “I’ve been wondering...”

“Yes,” she encouraged.

“I was just thinking that maybe you would like...maybe you wouldn’t mind...going out with me sometime.”

Ginny felt her heart give a leap. Finally! It had happened! Her dreams had come true! Harry Potter was asking her out. Merlin, he looked so adorable in his embarrassment.

She had had a crush on Mark Twist for years. Of course, when she had learned that Mark was really Harry Potter, she had been as shocked as everyone else. But, in a strange way, it also seemed as if it were meant to be.

She had grown up hearing stories of Harry Potter and spinning girlish dreams about him. Mark had replaced Harry in those daydreams after Mark had saved her from Tom Riddle. As she grew older, her crush slowly transformed into a deeper feeling.

When Mark had been sent to Azkaban, Ginny had been beyond devastated. She shuddered every time she thought back on that miserable year. She had been antisocial and depressed; her schoolwork had suffered so badly, she had worried that she would have to repeat the year. And then, miraculously, Mark had returned to reveal himself (just like a child’s fairytale) as a prince (well, Harry Potter anyway) in disguise and he had gone on to defeat the evil villain.

When Mark – now Harry – had left the wizarding world, Ginny had mourned all over again. She had become an expert at the drying spell, using it on her pillow after her frequent crying jags. When Harry had returned once more to their world, Ginny had rejoiced. She knew she

was wrong to do so. She knew that Harry was furious at having been forced to return. But, she couldn't lie to herself. She was happy Harry was back and she had spent most of last year hoping that he would ask her out. She had thought that he had looked her way sometimes, but nothing ever came of it.

Now, trying to appear cool, although she was internally screaming for joy, Ginny said calmly, "Sure, Harry. That would be great."

Harry stopped short and, smiling widely, asked eagerly, "Yeah?"

When Harry smiled, he looked so handsome! Ginny's heart beat faster. She forgave herself for being shallow because she had liked Mark even though he had been sort of plain. But, she couldn't deny that Harry was easy on the eyes. She knew that he would hate to hear it, but she agreed with the Daily Prophet – Harry was top on her list of the sexiest wizards. She smiled back at him now and nodded in confirmation. "Yeah."

" Oh." He continued strolling with her around the pitch. "That's...really great."

After a few turns around the pitch, he had calmed enough to try to have a conversation with the girl at his side. "Er...I'm actually not sure what to do next."

Ginny laughed. She reached out and grabbed Harry's hand. Holding it in hers, they continued strolling. "Why don't you tell me about what you did this summer?" she suggested.

Harry happily complied. It was amazing how easy it was to talk to Ginny. Now that he wasn't worrying about asking her out, or wondering whether or not she liked him, he found that it was easy to relax around her. Time passed quickly and it was only the nightly internal summons to present himself at Snape's office for his ongoing "treatment" that drove them inside.

Seeming to realize that she would have to help guide her new boyfriend, Ginny suggested that they meet in the library during their study hour the next day. Harry eagerly agreed. Waving goodbye,

Ginny went back to Gryffindor Tower while Harry turned toward the dungeons.

When he entered Snape's office, the potions master immediately knew something was different. "What have you been up to?" he asked suspiciously. "You seem in a particularly good mood and I don't trust it."

Harry grinned. "Ginny Weasley agreed to go out with me!" he admitted happily.

Snape was taken aback. He realized that he should have been expecting something like this far sooner. Harry was seventeen after all. He was good looking, famous, and – despite his mortification at the title – a very eligible bachelor.

Ginny Weasley was very pretty. She reminded Snape of Lily in many ways, not the least of which was her red hair. Snape wondered whether Harry was subconsciously attracted to the girl for this reason. No matter. She was a talented witch and was used to sticking up for herself – she had to be strong in order not to have been overwhelmed by six brothers. Harry needed someone who would be able to handle being the girlfriend of such a famous boy. Snape thought that she would do well.

Suddenly, Snape had an appalling thought. "Do I need to go over the birds and the bees with you?" he asked in alarm. He knew that Harry knew the mechanics of sex. But, would he have to teach the boy about sexually transmitted diseases, contraception, and the other assorted mysteries of sex education? He had the fleeting thought that he would prefer to face the Cruciatus Curse.

Harry shook his head vehemently. The boy didn't think there were many things he would enjoy less than such a conversation with Professor Snape. "No, sir!" he assured the older man, much to Snape's relief.

He waved Harry over to the bed to lie down so that they could begin the nightly treatment. "Just remember that I expect you to behave with proper decorum," said Snape stiffly.

“Don’t worry,” smiled Harry. “I’ll watch myself. After all, she has lots of brothers!”

Harry was happy. He wasn’t sure he completely trusted this feeling. The days melted into weeks, and the weeks melted into months. Classes were fine. Not even the knowledge that this year he would sit for his Newt exams could cause more than a slight flurry of anxiety. There were no crazy lunatics after him and no dark wizard threatened his world. He enjoyed spending time with his friends. And, he had a wonderful girlfriend.

He could finally tell that the long, painful treatments to loosen the effect of his worst memories were working. The crushing depression that had followed him like a shadow overhead in the aftermath of Voldemort’s defeat was no longer clawing at the corners of his mind.

Perhaps it was seeing Harry so happy with Ginny, but Ron and Hermione had finally admitted that they liked each other too, and had started dating. Harry thought that they made a good couple, although they were so different from each other. Perhaps, it was a case of opposites attracting, he thought.

The year seemed to pass at lightning speed. Before he knew it, the Christmas holidays had come and gone. With the end of his last year in sight, Harry started to wonder what he would do once he graduated. His indenture would formally end on his eighteenth birthday. He couldn’t wait. But, where would he live then? What job should he do?

Harry learned not to mention the end of the indenture to Snape. The potions master seemed to think that Harry was incapable of looking after himself and dropped snide remarks whenever the topic was broached.

One night, Harry had a conversation with Ron and Hermione that inadvertently created a firestorm. It started innocently enough. Ron had wondered aloud whether he might join Fred and George in their new joke shop. It was quite a success and they were looking for

some help. Ron then asked Harry what the other boy thought he would do once he graduated.

“I’m not sure,” admitted Harry. “I haven’t thought about it much. I could always go back to busing tables in a muggle restaurant, of course.” He had said it to be funny but Ron didn’t laugh.

“What do you mean? You wouldn’t consider returning to the muggle world, would you?”

A few other students wandered close by and overheard the rest of the conversation.

Harry reacted to the disdain in Ron’s voice when he spoke about the muggle world. “There’s nothing wrong with the muggle world, Ron. My mother was muggleborn, remember?”

Ron waved his hand in dismissal. “I’m not talking about muggles. I’m talking about living in the muggle world. You wouldn’t really go back there, would you?”

Harry shrugged. “I don’t know. Anything’s possible, I guess. At least there, no one forces me to do things I don’t want to do. The wizarding world thought it was acceptable to kidnap me, put me under an indenture and force me back to Hogwarts.” The more he thought about it, the angrier he became, and, by the time he had finished speaking, the resentment was clear in his voice.

Hermione had drifted over in time to hear Harry’s outburst. She and Ron exchanged worried looks. Harry hadn’t mentioned his indenture in a while and they had allowed themselves to believe that their friend was no longer upset by the situation. Looking at Harry with troubled eyes, Ron offered tentatively, “They only brought you back because they were worried about you.”

Harry snorted. Hermione said, “You know, Harry, that in the muggle world they would have intervened too, if you had had parents. You might have received counseling, been put on anti-depressants, or been sent to a mental health facility. There are all sorts of options.

The wizarding world may use different tactics, but it's toward the same end."

"Hermione, I think you should save your breath. No one is going to convince me that putting me under an indenture was a good thing," Harry stated firmly. "It's just so typical of this world. I've said it before. The Ministry, Dumbledore, too many people in this world. Fundamentally, they think they are better than other people – or other creatures."

"So, they should have let you die?" asked Ron, angrily.

"I'm not saying that they shouldn't have intervened Ron. Maybe I needed help. I can admit it now. I know the healers were concerned. But, don't you think that, maybe, just maybe, Dumbledore, or Madam Pomfrey, or...I don't know...you, could have convinced me to work with the healers? Neither Dumbledore nor anyone at the Ministry spoke to me even once about the need for me to cooperate before putting me under an indenture."

Ron gazed at Harry blankly, taken aback at this view of the matter. "I...I..."

"You didn't think of that, did you?" accused Harry. "It's because you're a part of this world, Ron. You, too, Hermione," he turned suddenly to the silent girl. "You may be muggleborn, but you have absorbed some of the arrogance of being a part of the magical world. Witches and wizards are so used to calling the shots, telling others what to do – goblins, werewolves, centaurs. For Merlin's sake, they have enslaved the house elves. It's part of the wizard psyche. A dangerous part."

Distressed, Ron's voice dropped to almost a whisper. "You sound like you don't like us, Harry."

"Sometimes, I don't!" Harry retorted, harshly. The conversation had reminded him of all his old resentments and his bitterness flowed freely. "This world doesn't understand boundaries. It doesn't understand the need for mutual respect. At its worst, it enabled

Voldemort to gain power, because he fed into that arrogance, the belief that wizards are better than everyone else, with pureblood wizards at the top of the heap. And, when it comes to how I was treated..."

Harry shook his head in disgust. "Once again, arrogance! No one asked my opinion on what to do. No one asked whether I would prefer to stay in the muggle world, perhaps seeking some of the intervention you mentioned, Hermione. Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that Dumbledore or the Ministry or anyone else had bad intentions. It's just that, at its core, this world holds non-wizards in contempt. And, its most powerful or influential wizards have god complexes."

Ron and Hermione gazed at Harry, appalled. Put in these words, the actions of the wizarding world in subjecting Harry to an indenture seemed inexcusable. And, Harry was right. They, too, had contributed to it!

The silence dragged out uncomfortably. Harry had roundly condemned their world and they didn't know what to say. His anger spent, Harry felt slightly guilty. He hadn't meant to unload so vehemently on Ron and Hermione.

Trying to make amends, he deliberately turned the topic to safer grounds, asking Hermione what she thought she might do after graduation.

And thus started the rumor that Harry was planning to return to the muggle world once he turned eighteen.

Harry wondered why, all of a sudden, students and teachers seemed to be watching him more intently. It reminded him of the overwhelming attention he had received when he had first returned to the wizarding world. But, this was slightly different. Now, when they watched him, there was a hint of sadness and betrayal in their eyes. Their lips pursed with disappointment, hurt or anger. Even Dumbledore seemed to be watching him with worried eyes. Snape just seemed more irritable than usual. Had he done something wrong?

With everyone behaving so strangely, Harry was particularly glad to have an excuse to escape the school for a few hours. Fred and George had invited him to the grand opening of their expanded store in Diagon Alley. They had done so well in the few months they had been open, they had been able to assume the lease in the store next door. Harry was invited to the dedication of the newly expanded facilities.

Given Snape's recent grumpiness, Harry wasn't sure that Snape would permit him to go to the event. However, he was pleasantly surprised when permission was granted. He didn't realize that Snape was willing to encourage anything that would make the boy feel connected to the wizarding world.

Ron and Ginny were also given special permission to visit Diagon Alley for the grand opening, as it was their brothers' shop that was hosting the event. Since Ginny did not yet know how to apparate, and Dumbledore did not favor students traveling by side-by-side apparition, the three caught the Knight Bus in Hogsmeade and arrived in Diagon Alley in time for lunch.

Fred and George gave Harry the grand tour of the place. At first, Ron and Ginny were a bit jealous that Harry was given some free joke samples. However, after swearing them to secrecy, Harry admitted that he was a silent partner in the shop. They were both very impressed that he had invested his money without Dumbledore or Snape knowing.

It was a really fun day. George and Fred gave demonstrations of some of their most popular tricks, some of which Harry remembered from years past. Harry's favorite was an oldie but goodie -- the Canary Cream. Fred had pretended to bring back sweets from a nearby bakery for their dessert. Unsuspectingly, Ron had bitten into a cream puff and had turned into a canary.

When he turned back into himself, Ron glared at his brothers. They ignored his anger and were doubled over with laughter. At first, their laughter was so loud, Ron didn't realize that Harry was laughing too. But, turning to see who else was laughing at him, he saw Harry

laughing delightedly. Harry saw a feather which had fallen off the canary-Ron and picked it up from the floor. The sight of the feather sent the boy into further peels of laughter.

Ron stared at Harry in shock. "He's laughing," he whispered.

"What?" asked George, no longer laughing, but with a smile still on his lips.

Ron nodded toward Harry. "He's laughing. Harry Potter is laughing."

Harry's eyes sparkled as he held out the feather to Ron. "What did you say, Ron?" he asked.

"I've never heard you laugh before, Harry."

"What?" Harry stopped and considered for a moment. "I'm sure I must have laughed before."

"No," said Ron, shaking his head. "You haven't. Ever."

"Oh."

The twins and Ginny stared at him. He shrugged, feeling self-conscious. "I guess I haven't had much to laugh about in my life."

Ginny had also heard the rumors of Harry's leaving the wizarding world but she hadn't taken them seriously. After all, Harry had never mentioned any plans to leave and she was his girlfriend, for Merlin's sake. Even if he was angry that he had been brought back to the wizarding world, surely he wasn't going to leave when the indenture was lifted, was he? But, now, for the first time, she felt unsure. Tentatively, she said, "I know that your life's been difficult, Harry, but it's getting better, right?"

He smiled widely. "You bet!" He threw an arm around her shoulder. "Starting with you!"

Ron made pretend gagging noises and Fred and George pretended to threaten Harry for hugging their sister.

Harry laughed again. It was a wonderful sound.

Leaving Diagon Alley, the three teenagers exited through the Leaky Cauldron. They were delayed in leaving because Harry was recognized and they had to wait until all the wizards there had shaken his hand and spoken to him.

It was getting late and they hoped that the Knight Bus wouldn't take too long. Ginny was just raising her wand to summon the Bus, when Harry pulled down her hand to stop her. She looked at him curiously, but he was staring fixedly across the street. He stood so still and a strange energy radiated from him. His eyes burned in his face, which was suddenly pale.

"What's the matter?" she asked, frightened.

But, he didn't respond. Across the street, standing in front of a muggle store, oblivious to him, were the Dursleys.

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Chapter Thirty Five – Year Seven; Insecurities

“Stay here!” Harry said harshly, leaving Ron and Ginny staring after him as he crossed the street.

Harry felt as if he were moving in a dream. The air around him was strangely thick and he had trouble breathing. He saw his aunt and uncle as if at the end of a long tunnel. The world around them was hazy and his vision seemed to darken at the edges. Only the tall thin woman and the heavyset man were in focus.

As Harry approached, Aunt Petunia felt his presence and turned her head to look at him. Her face turned so white, her blush stood out on her cheeks in angry circles. Her nose flared and her face screwed up in a look of disgust and anger.

Turning to see what had caused his wife to stiffen and draw in her breath, Vernon’s eyes also alit upon Harry. Like his wife, he immediately stiffened. But, unlike his wife, Vernon’s face turned beet red. He looked like he was having a stroke.

“You!” he uttered, in tones of the deepest loathing.

Petunia’s voice shook with fury. “Why are you here? I told you to leave our family alone! Haven’t you caused enough trouble?”

Harry stood completely still, the hatred washing over him. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw a burly teenager draw near. “Mom. Dad. What’s the matter?” asked the boy.

Harry realized that it was Dudley. He had grown so tall and big in the six years since Harry had last seen him, Harry did not recognize him.

“Harry?” asked Dudley. Apparently, Harry was not as changed as Dudley was.

Harry gave a jerky nod, confirming his identity. Dudley looked curiously at his cousin but did not offer him any greeting. Instead,

Dudley looked at his parents, waiting for a cue as to how he should behave.

“Keep away from us!” demanded Vernon.

As if from a distance, Harry heard himself speak. “Don’t you care at all about what happened to me after you threw me out of the house? Don’t you want to know anything?”

Petunia’s lips pursed. Seeing this, Harry was reminded of the many times during his childhood that her face had borne just that expression. He had forgotten.

“It’s no concern of ours what happened to you,” she said. “I told you then and I’ll tell you now. You are the devil’s spawn. You are evil and a freak. The best news that we could ever hear would be to find out that you were dead.”

Harry felt himself reel back. He hadn’t realized that her words could still hurt him.

“You have no idea of the trouble you caused us, boy,” spat Vernon. “Those freaky friends of yours came looking for you. They weren’t happy to find out that you were gone. Then, after we spoke to this nice woman named Rita, they made us leave our home because they said that we were in danger from others of your kind looking for revenge. Revenge for what, I ask you? We treated you better than you had any right to expect. If we hadn’t been so kindhearted, we would never have taken you in, in the first place. But you know what they say: no good deed ever goes unpunished. We had to change our names! Dudley had to change schools and I had to get another job. We had to live in this dumpy little house they brought us to. It was only in the last year that we’ve been allowed to leave and resume our lives.”

Harry wasn’t sure what drove him to ask, but he heard himself say, “I am your nephew. You raised me from the age of one. Didn’t you ever love me at all?”

Petunia looked him up and down and stared at him with hate in her eyes. "Who could ever love you?"

Harry stumbled backwards. Without another word, he crossed the road. As if in the distance, he heard a car honking at him. He had crossed without checking that the light was green.

"Harry?" asked Ron and Ginny, in frightened tones. Harry had a terrible expression on his face.

Harry didn't say a word. He grabbed each of them by the arm and apparated. When they arrived in Hogsmeade, Harry dropped their arms and started walking toward Hogwarts.

Ron and Ginny exchanged worried looks. Harry had just apparated in disregard for Dumbledore's instruction that they take the Knight Bus. He had obviously been upset by something those muggles had said to him. Who were they? What had they said?

Ginny ran to catch up with Harry, who was striding rapidly toward the castle. "Harry, slow down!" she gasped. She reached out a hand to grab him, but he pulled away.

Her worry increased. "What's the matter, Harry? What happened?"

Harry ignored her and walked faster.

Ron stood in front of Harry, to try to slow him down, but the other teen just shoved past him. "Harry, for Merlin's sake! What happened?" demanded his friend.

But, Harry said not a word. He strode through the Hogwarts gates and over the grounds without pausing. He ignored all greetings thrown at him. He entered the castle and went directly to Gryffindor Tower, where he went straight to his bed, drew the curtains and cast a muffliato charm around his bed.

Ginny and Ron arrived back at the castle just shortly behind Harry. They hesitated in the entrance of the castle, wondering what to do.

“Should we follow him?” Ron asked.

“Something happened. He won’t talk to us. We’ve got to get help. Let’s find McGonagall.”

Ron disagreed. “Snape holds his indenture. He can force Harry to tell us what’s wrong.”

They ran toward Snape’s office and knocked loudly on the door. Without waiting for permission to enter, they opened the door. Snape was sitting at his desk, holding a quill and writing on some parchment. He looked up in surprise at the sudden interruption. Seeing the expressions on the face of the Weasley siblings, he stood up quickly.

“What’s the matter? Where’s Harry?” he demanded, his voice sharp.

“Professor,” gasped Ginny. “Something happened, but we don’t know what. But, it’s bad. We had just left The Leaky Cauldron and we were standing in the muggle street about to wave down the Knight Bus. Harry recognized some muggles and he went over to talk to them.” Ginny’s voice choked at this point and tears of fear started to roll down her face.

Ron, face white, continued the explanation. “Sir. They said something to him. We don’t know what. We couldn’t hear. But, he came back from them with such a look on his face. He wouldn’t talk to us. He came straight back here to the castle. I think he’s gone back to Gryffindor Tower but I don’t know for sure. We came to find you.”

Ginny wiped away her tears. “Please, Professor. You’ve got to do something. You didn’t see his face!”

“Come,” Snape commanded, as he strode from the room. Swiftly, the teens led the way to Gryffindor Tower. When Snape entered the common room, the students lounging there let out audible gasps. One boy dropped a stack of books he was holding. They fell with a loud thump. Snape ignored them all and strode rapidly up the stairs to the boys’ dormitory. The students looked at each other in fear. Why was Snape here?

Ron and Ginny stayed behind in the common room, uncertain what to do.

“Is something wrong with Harry?” asked Neville.

“I...I don’t know,” admitted Ginny. She cast a helpless look at her brother. Turning away from the other students, she and Ron took seats in the corner of the room and refused to answer any more of the questions being thrown at them.

When Snape entered the dormitory room, he saw that one of the beds had the curtains drawn around it. Striding over to the bed, he pulled the curtains back in one swift movement.

Harry, who had been lying on the bed staring at the ceiling, jumped in shock at the sudden movement. Seeing Snape, his mouth dropped. He jumped up from the bed immediately. “Sir!” he gasped.

“Potter,” returned Snape. The older man’s voice was neutral but his eyes were sharp and searching.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked. Then, realizing that he may have sounded a bit rude, he added, “I mean, I didn’t expect to ever see you here.”

“I assure you that being in Gryffindor Tower is not the highlight of my day. I don’t appreciate being put to this necessity. But, your friends are worried about you.”

Harry’s face took on a closed look.

“I understand you ran into some muggles outside The Leaky Cauldron?”

Harry nodded reluctantly.

“Your relatives?”

So, Snape had guessed. “Yes,” Harry admitted.

“What did they say to you?”

“The usual,” said Harry bitterly. “That I am a freak and that they wish I would die already.”

“How did you feel about meeting them?”

Harry threw Snape a ‘are-you-for-real’ look. “I was angry and upset, of course. What do you want me to say?”

“I want you not to care,” Snape responded. “They are evil and deserve to be in Azkaban.”

“I don’t care,” Harry replied.

“That’s a lie. It’s unfortunate, Potter. But, it’s obvious that you do care. Very much.”

Harry was silent. What business was it of Snape’s anyway?

“My father was not a nice man, Potter.”

Harry started. It was the first time that Snape had ever told him anything personal about his life (other than that he had loved Harry’s mother).

“But, despite his cruelty – or perhaps it was because of it – I spent years trying to win his approval. Without success, I might add. I was never free of him until I realized that he was not worth my energy – that his approval was meaningless.”

Harry looked at him sharply. “But are you free of him, sir? Are we ever free of our pasts?”

“Our pasts help form us, for good or ill. But, we need not be limited by them. If anyone should know that, Potter, it is you.”

After a short silence, Harry spoke in a low voice, "Today, when I saw them again, all I could remember is how much I had wanted them to love me." It was a painful admission.

"And now you know that they never did and never will. But the fault lies with them, not you."

Harry did not respond.

Realizing that the boy needed time to think about what he had said, Snape brought the conversation to a close. "Your friends are worried about you. You should let them know that you are all right."

Harry nodded and followed Snape out of the room. The common room fell silent when Snape and Harry descended the stairs from the boys' dormitory. Snape stayed only long enough to see that Harry had joined Ron and Ginny. As soon as the potions master had climbed out of the portrait hole, everyone in the common room started speaking at once, asking what had happened and why Snape, of all people, had entered Gryffindor Tower.

Harry ignored everyone. Speaking to Ron and Ginny, he said, "I'm sorry I was so rude. It was just the shock of seeing them. I didn't mean to upset you." Everyone else shamelessly eavesdropped on the conversation.

Ginny cried, "Oh, Harry! It's not about whether we're upset! It's about you! What happened? Who were those people?"

Harry took a deep breath. "That was my aunt, uncle and cousin."

There was utter silence in the room. Everyone knew Harry's family history.

"I thought they were in prison somewhere," whispered Ron.

"Apparently not," said Harry, dryly. "From what they told me, they've spent the last number of years in a Ministry safe house."

“What did they say to you?” asked Ginny fearfully.

“They were their usual cheerful selves,” replied Harry breezily, very aware that everyone was listening. He gave a laugh that, even to his own ears sounded hollow and forced. “It’s safe to bet we won’t be sharing Christmas holidays together any time soon.”

Hermione climbed through the portrait hole and entered the room. She had been studying in the library. When she saw them, she gave a bright smile. “Hi! How was the grand opening? I bet the store is great.”

It took Harry a moment to realize what she was talking about. Meeting the Dursleys had driven all else from his mind. Collecting himself, Harry plastered a smile on his face and answered, “It was great. Fred and George have done themselves proud. We had a really fun time. Right?” Harry turned to Ron and Ginny, who obediently followed his lead and nodded their heads. Harry deliberately kept the conversation centered on the joke shop. He was obviously unwilling to discuss his relatives further and, reluctantly, Ginny and Ron let the topic drop.

Ginny watched her boyfriend with worried eyes. Those horrible people! She wished she had known who they were when they were in London. She would have thrown the bat bogey hex at them and not given a hoot about the Decree for the Reasonable Restriction of Underage Magic or the Statute of Secrecy or anything! Those foul creatures!

But, how she wished Harry would share his feelings with her. He was pretending like it was no big deal that he had met his relatives. But, she knew it was a big deal. She had seen his face.

Ginny knew that Harry had lived his life mistrustful of others. He was not used to sharing his fears or worries. But, now, she wondered whether he would ever learn to open up to her. Would he always be secretive and emotionally distant? How could they ever be really close – having the kind of relationship that her parents had, for

example – if he was not willing to share his thoughts? How could she be there for him if he pushed her away?

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The next day was Saturday. It was a beautiful, warm day and Harry knew his refusal to join his friends outside would be cause for concern. It was easier to go along but he was present in body only. He stood slightly apart from them and it was clear from the distant expression on his face that he was in his own world.

Suddenly, there was a stir among the students which penetrated Harry's absorption. Looking for the source of the commotion, he saw Dumbledore – robes flowing behind him – walking steadily toward him. Students hurried nearer to overhear what the headmaster would say.

Harry looked at the headmaster in surprise, wondering what he wanted. Dumbledore did not usually seek out students. When the older wizard was close enough for Harry to see the serious expression on his face, the headmaster stopped and raised his wand. In a calm voice, Dumbledore said, "Harry. Please take out your wand."

"What? Oh. Sure," said Harry and he drew his wand from its holster inside his sleeve.

In the same calm voice, Dumbledore said, "Defend yourself."

"Wha..."

Without further warning, Dumbledore shouted, "Stupefy!"

Unprepared, the curse hit Harry squarely and he was thrown backwards. Luckily, it wasn't at full strength. While he fell heavily, he only had the wind knocked out of him.

Instinctively, his hand tightened on his wand and he thrust it out in front of him, pointing it at Dumbledore. Staring at the headmaster in shock, the boy shouted, "Why did you do that? What's going on?"

"I told you to defend yourself, Harry. I suggest you pay attention." Dumbledore waved his wand again and another curse flew toward Harry.

Harry quickly put up a protective shield and the curse bounded harmlessly away. Harry scrambled to his feet.

"Are you crazy?!" he shouted. "What are you doing?"

Dumbledore ignored him and another beam of light flew at Harry. The teen ducked and the spell soared over his head.

Students around them were shouting in alarm. Dumbledore raised his voice, though he still spoke calmly. "Do not be alarmed. No one will hurt you. This is between Harry and me only."

Harry gasped. "You're not Dumbledore!" he accused. "Someone get a teacher! Call for help! Someone is impersonating Dumbledore!"

Dumbledore laughed. "Not so, Harry. It is really I. Shall I prove it?" Dumbledore's smile faded completely. Looking grave now, he said, "I am the person who, to my undying shame, left you in custody at the Ministry to serve the Greater Good."

Harry's jaw tightened and he narrowed his eyes. It was Dumbledore.

Dumbledore lifted his hands over his head and a flock of birds assembled and dove at Harry. "What the...!" shouted Harry. He threw up his hands protectively and the birds turned into little bubbles that burst harmlessly against him.

Harry's temper exploded. He didn't know why, but Dumbledore was attacking him. Well, the old man asked for it! Tuning out all distractions, Harry focused only on the solitary wizard standing in front of him. The teen bent down and touched the ground. He sent a

ripple of energy through the grass to travel, like a stream of running water, until it reached Dumbledore. When it reached the wizard, the ground gave a heave and threw the headmaster into the air. However, the headmaster landed easily a few feet away.

“Interesting, Harry. But, surely, you can do better than that!”

Did the old man want to be hurt? Had he lost his mind? Harry hesitated. Maybe the headmaster was suffering from some spell or potion that affected his brain.

Dumbledore took advantage of Harry’s hesitation and threw a stinging hex at the teen. Harry deflected the curse but it caught the edge of his elbow. “Ow!”

The headmaster said musingly, “I had wondered whether my wand would work against you, Harry. I wasn’t sure whether the wand retained its allegiance to you, since I didn’t win it back from you in a duel. You simply gave it to me after the battle with Voldemort was over. But, apparently, the wand accepts that I am its master.”

Harry glared at Dumbledore. The headmaster had just cut him with a stinging hex and, instead of being concerned, Dumbledore wanted to engage in an academic discussion. Through gritted teeth, Harry muttered, “I’ll win it from you now, old man, and, this time, I’m not giving it back!”

Dumbledore overheard him and laughed. Infuriated, Harry clasped his hands together in front of him, his wand gripped firmly between his palms, and centered his focus on his magical core. The energy dispersed outward and the wind around him whipped into a frenzy. Harry focused on directing that energy into a concentrated flow and the wind, roaring its fury, shot at the headmaster. For a moment, Dumbledore was hidden from view as the maelstrom enveloped him.

Only a few moments passed, though, before the wind died down and Dumbledore was revealed, looking perfectly fine albeit slightly windblown. In retaliation, the headmaster encircled Harry in a ring of fire. Harry didn’t bother to look down as he muttered a spell that extinguished the fire easily.

Harry searched through his mind for spells that would help him in this strange duel. Hoping that Dumbledore was not familiar with these curses, Harry tried casting spells to attack the senses. In quick succession, he cast spells meant to overwhelm hearing, smell, and eyesight. The spells were effective but, unfortunately, in each case, Dumbledore recovered quickly.

The headmaster slashed his wand through the air and Harry found that he couldn't draw breath. He was choking. He reached up with his hands to grab at his throat and saw Dumbledore raise his wand to cast another spell. He dove out of the way and whatever new spell Dumbledore had cast missed Harry by inches. Still gasping for breath, Harry forced himself to calm down and think clearly. He centered his magic on his own body, envisioning himself breathing easily. His breathing resumed.

Furious at Dumbledore, Harry threw another spell. Knowing that the headmaster would try to step out of the way, Harry aimed the spell to one side and, sure enough, the headmaster stepped into the spell. Immediately, the old wizard shrank to the size of a goblin.

Incredibly, Harry saw the headmaster smile. Smile! The old man really was insane!

Dumbledore popped back to his regular size. He waved his wand and Harry's glasses flew off his face. Damn! Harry could not see very far without his glasses. He quickly conjured up a new pair, on which he placed a sticking charm.

If Dumbledore was going to take away Harry's glasses, the old man could lose his own! And, Harry caused the glass in Dumbledore's spectacles to shatter. And, for good measure, if the headmaster was going to try to strangle him, let him choke himself! And, Harry waved his wand in a corkscrew motion. Dumbledore's beard started twisting itself around the headmaster's neck.

The headmaster waved his wand lazily and his spectacles repaired themselves easily. With a soft murmur, his beard stopped twisting like a snake and fell obediently down the wizard's chest.

“I think that’s enough,” said Dumbledore, putting up his wand.

Harry was exhausted, sweaty and irritable. “What do you mean, ‘that’s enough’? You came here and, without any reason, attacked me and you just decide that you’ve had enough?”

Dumbledore inclined his head. “I thought you needed reminding that you are a very powerful wizard, Harry.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I wanted to remind you, Harry, that you are not a victim. Whatever your aunt and uncle may have done to you in the past, is just that – in the past.”

So that’s what this was all about: his meeting with the Dursleys yesterday. Harry froze and stared expressionlessly at the headmaster.

Dumbledore continued. “You didn’t bring down Voldemort by accident. Yes, you had luck on your side, but you also had talent and resourcefulness. I think it is obvious that your skill is remarkable. At the age of seventeen, you are able to hold your own in a duel with me. That is an astonishing feat, if I do say so myself.”

Dumbledore gestured to the large group of students who were ranged on one side watching the duel. “I daresay any one of your fellow students would assure you that you are respected and admired.”

Harry refused to answer. Dumbledore tried to reach the boy. “Do not look for validation from people who are too small-minded to appreciate what a truly special person you are.”

Finally, Harry spoke. “I don’t care about them.”

“I wish that were true. Unfortunately, I believe that you do care. You have been pulling away from your friends and allowing your aunt and uncle’s unkind words to poison you. Look around you, Harry. There are plenty of people who care about you, even love you.”

Harry swallowed. He wanted to believe. He truly did. But, maybe Dumbledore was just saying this because the older wizard felt guilty about how he had failed Harry. The teen looked around at the students watching him, among them Ginny, Ron and Hermione. Even Draco Malfoy was watching in the distance. Did any of them really care about him, or was it the fact that he was the famous Harry Potter that mattered? Draco had disliked him when he was just Mark Twist. While Ron, Ginny and Hermione had all been friendly with Mark Twist, weren't they friendlier, and more interested in him now? Harry remembered how Ron had fawned all over the imposter Harry. Perhaps Ron was his best friend because he was Harry Potter. Maybe Ginny and Hermione were the same.

People weren't to be trusted, after all. He had recently condemned the wizarding world to Ron and Hermione. But, muggles had as many faults. People – magical or muggle --were basically flawed. Even at the best of times, it was a mistake to believe that they would be faithful. Why think that they would stand by him?

Self-doubt clouded his eyes. His aunt had been so sure that no one would ever love him. And, despite what Snape and Dumbledore may say, Petunia and Vernon were capable of love. They loved their son, Dudley. It was just Harry who they didn't love. There was something within him that made him unlovable.

There was no point arguing with the headmaster about it. It was easier just to pretend that he agreed. So, Harry nodded and said, "Yeah. I know."

Dumbledore sighed, not sure that he had gotten through to the teen. He put a hand behind him and laid it on his lower back. He stretched, rotating his shoulders and neck. "Oh, I'm not as young as I used to be," he said. "I'll be feeling these aches!"

Harry smiled. It was good to know that he had made the headmaster groan. Dumbledore shook his head at the teen. "Just wait until you are past your hundredth birthday! I better go see Madam Pomfrey to get some of her excellent pain-relieving cream." With this, the

headmaster made his way back to the castle. The students watched him until he disappeared from sight.

When the headmaster was gone, all eyes swung back to Harry. He slipped his wand back into his sleeve. As if this were a signal, he found himself surrounded by a group of teens, exclaiming over the fight.

“That was the most amazing thing I’ve ever seen!” exclaimed Ron.

“That thing you did with the wind, Harry, that was...” words failed. Hermione just shook her head in admiration.

Draco hurried over as well. “Did you learn this stuff from You Know Who? How come he never taught me anything like that?! It was phenomenal!”

Other students made similar observations, patting his back and exclaiming over how happy they were to have witnessed the duel. A few mentioned how jealous other students were going to be to learn that they had missed it.

Only Ginny didn’t rave about the fight. Instead, once the other students had wandered away to talk among themselves about the amazing duel, and she and Harry had found a spot to speak privately, she said seriously, “He’s right.” Harry looked puzzled. “I mean what Dumbledore said about us caring about you. We do. I do! I think I love you, Harry.”

She waited with baited breath to see what he would say. She had been planning for weeks how to tell him. She had imagined any number of different ways for him to react to her admission. She had pictured him excited, happy, scared, nervous. But, Harry didn’t react in any of these ways. Instead, he searched her face intently as if trying to determine if she was telling the truth.

“But why?” he asked, a note of real puzzlement in his voice.

She laughed involuntarily. "Why? You are very lovable, Harry." She smiled but he didn't smile back. "Don't you love me?" she asked, her voice breaking slightly.

Harry was taken aback. "Of course, I love you, Ginny," he said. "What's not to love? You're wonderful. Funny. Kind. Beautiful. I love spending time with you. I love being with you. But, you're so wonderful, I don't understand why you like me."

"I love you, Harry. Don't be afraid of the word."

Harry continued to search her face intently, looking for answers to a question she didn't understand. Urgently, he said, "Do you really love me? Do you even see me? Not just the famous Harry Potter but the real me?"

"Yes, Harry Potter. I see the real you. I see the insecure boy who craves love. The frightened child who doesn't believe he deserves it. I see that you distrust everyone, waiting for people to disappoint and betray you. But, despite your lack of faith in us, I see a man who will protect the weak and innocent no matter the cost to himself. I see the wonderful, special person you are."

Harry shook his head in denial. "You have a picture in your head of me that's far better than the reality."

"No, I don't. I'm not the one who refuses to see the real you. You are. You still believe what your aunt and uncle told you when you were a child. You still believe you are unwanted and unloved. But it's not true. I want you, Harry. I love you." She flung herself against him and hugged him tightly.

After a momentary pause, Harry hugged her back and lay his cheek against the top of her head. He breathed in the clean, sweet smell of her hair. Oh, how he wished he could believe her!

But, he didn't.

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Chapter Thirty Six – Year Seven; Beginnings

The year drew to an end. Seventh years sat for their Newts. Harry sympathized with Hermione, Ron and his other friends who were worried about their grades. Harry, himself, was not stressed at all. He knew that he would earn acceptable grades in certain classes, such as Potions and Herbology. And, in classes such as Charms, Transfiguration and Defense Against the Dark Arts, it was a foregone conclusion that he would earn an “Outstanding”. His learning in these subjects went far beyond the school curriculum.

The examiners for those courses were thrilled to test Harry. After putting him through the mandatory exercises, they begged him to show some of his skill. He entertained them with some flashy spellwork and knew that they were impressed.

The elderly witch who had tested Harry in Transfiguration was in raptures over Harry’s ability to conjure, in one wave of his wand, a comfortable arm chair complete with a sleeping cat. After the chair and cat had been vanished, and the teacher had finished scribbling notes in her clipboard, the witch stared intently at Harry and said, “It is clear that you have the ability to be one of the greatest wizards our world has ever known.”

Harry smiled in pleasure at her praise, although it was a bit embarrassing. “Thank you, ma’am.”

“You have a gift. A gift that I hope you will share with our world. It would be a shame if you left us.”

Harry was taken aback. It was the first time that someone had openly admitted that they thought he would truly decide to leave the wizarding world.

“Yes, ma’am,” said Harry, noncommittally and he hurriedly left the room.

The witch's words made him think. In just a little over a month, he would turn eighteen. His indenture would end. Where would he go? What would he do? He had thought about it before but now the time was upon him to decide.

Once the indenture ended, he would need to find another place to live. While Snape would probably permit him to stay for a while, Harry thought it time for him to get his own place. He suspected that Snape would miss him when he left. Harry smiled when he thought that the potions master would undergo torture rather than admit it.

So, where should he go? Did he want to leave the wizarding world? As he had told Ron and Hermione weeks before, this world was fundamentally flawed -- arrogant in its belief in its own superiority and contemptuous of others. Did he really want to stay in this world? A world that had betrayed him time and time again?

On the other hand, couldn't he help change this world for the better? He had already done so, after all. Not just by defeating Voldemort, but by forcing the wizarding world to acknowledge its own culpability for the racism and intolerance that had led to the Dark Lord's rise to power.

It wasn't as if the muggle world was any better. That world was filled with hatred, greed, betrayal, and pain too. Prejudice and intolerance were absolutely everywhere.

No, there was nothing for him in the muggle world. When he had left the wizarding world the last time, he had wanted to start over. He had been angry with everyone and had wanted to find a place to fit in. But, he fit in here, didn't he? He could stay. He was only eighteen and yet he could wield enormous influence over the wizarding world. If he chose to stay, chose to "take his rightful place in this world," as Draco would call it, over time, couldn't he change this world even more?

While it was sometimes annoying to be the focus of attention everywhere he went, it was kind of nice to have people smile when they saw him and want to shake his hand. It wasn't a substitute for friendship or love, but it filled up some of the lonely spaces of his heart.

He was lucky, really, when he thought about it. At least, being “Harry Potter” ensured that he would have friends and a girlfriend. Despite what Snape, Dumbledore and Ginny had said, he had to accept that he would never really be loved. It would be worse in the muggle world where he wouldn’t have his fame to provide him with even this pale reflection of love and caring. Why not allow himself to enjoy having friends and maybe, with time, a family? He wouldn’t be the first person in the world to give up on dreams of happily-ever-after in exchange for a practical reality.

Having decided that he would remain in the wizarding world, at least for now, Harry scoped out apartments for rent in Diagon Alley. Besides, he told himself, he could always decide to travel or even leave the wizarding world entirely if it didn’t work out.

Harry decided that he would give himself the rest of the summer before even attempting to find a job. After all, he had plenty of money from his inheritance to fund a short break. He thought he’d like to learn more about other creatures. Perhaps, find a job that enabled him to spend time with goblins, elves, centaurs or others. After all, if he was going to try to give them a voice in the wizarding world, he needed to know more about them. He would look around after the summer and see.

The last day at Hogwarts was very sad for Harry. He remembered how he had been so hopeful that he had found a home when he had first arrived. Little had he known then the tumultuous years that lay ahead. Perhaps it was a good thing that he had no talent for divination. Now, that he was leaving for good, he knew he would miss the castle tremendously. Harry knew that most of the other seventh years were equally sad to be leaving.

Harry waved goodbye to the students as they left for Hogsmeade to board the Hogwarts Express back to London. Hermione, Ron, Ginny and Draco had already promised to meet him at the Ministry the day he turned eighteen and his indenture was lifted. In the meantime, Ginny and Harry promised to write to each other every day.

With the students gone, Hogwarts seemed so empty and forlorn. Harry spent the last week wandering from room to room, impressing the images in his memory and saying a mental goodbye. The day Harry left Hogwarts with Snape, Dumbledore came to say farewell.

Harry politely shook the headmaster's hand and muttered goodbye. The teen knew that the older wizard wished him well but Harry was never going to be comfortable in his presence. There was too much history.

Dumbledore regarded Harry with a sad smile. Whenever he looked at the boy, he was struck by a deep regret that he had missed his chance for Harry to look upon him as a friend. He believed in his heart that, if they each had made different choices along the years, they would have become close. Perhaps today they would be more like mentor and student or...dare he admit it...grandfather and grandson. After all, Harry was such a special boy. But, it was not meant to be. The past had led them to this moment and, if he were honest, he would not change anything. Every step – good or bad – had led to the downfall of Voldemort. But, that didn't mean he didn't wish that it could have been different.

Now, he retreated into formality as he said, "It is always a privilege to see young men and women embark upon a new stage in their life," he said. "In your case, we are eager to see you assume your place in our world. At the same time, we will miss you here at Hogwarts."

"Thank you, sir. I will miss Hogwarts, too."

"I hope you don't mind, Harry, but I'll need to be present at the Ministry when your indenture comes to an end."

"Oh. Sure," said Harry. "Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Draco, Ginny, and Hermione will be there, too. And Professor Snape, of course."

"Yes, I know. While you came of age last year, in many ways, this birthday is your true coming of age." After a short pause, Dumbledore continued. "I have in my possession a special cloak of your father's. An invisibility cloak. I plan on giving it to you then."

“An invisibility cloak!” Harry became excited. “Wow! That’s great. They are really rare.”

“I haven’t given it to you before because, to be honest, I thought it best to wait until the indenture was over.”

Harry smiled. “Afraid I’d get into trouble with it, huh?”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled. “Perhaps,” he admitted.

Harry had a sudden thought. “I’m glad you didn’t give it to that imposter, Andrew Danirson, back in third year.”

Dumbledore nodded. “I would have, if the boy’s behavior hadn’t been so troubling. I was not sure that he would have made good use of the cloak and I decided to hold onto it until he was older. As it turned out, that was a lucky decision as, of course, the cloak did not belong to him.”

Harry nodded. “I can’t wait to see it.”

Dumbledore laughed. “I’m afraid to even guess at the use you will make of the cloak.”

Harry smiled.

The headmaster inclined his head in farewell. “Until your birthday, Harry. Take care.”

“Goodbye, sir.”

The rest of June and July passed quietly. Snape was increasingly irritable, but Harry knew that it was because the potions master was not pleased that Harry would be leaving. In preparation for his eighteenth birthday, Harry had already put a deposit down on an apartment in Diagon Alley.

The day of his birthday, Harry awoke feeling excited. This was the day! No more letting people into his head for “medical treatments”. Harry could appreciate that the loosening of his memories had helped, but he was ecstatic to be done with it. At least, for now. Maybe he’d decide to have certain memories “loosened” in the future. But, it would be his choice. No more doing what other people told him to do. He was free!

Shortly before lunch, Harry and Snape floored to the Ministry, where Scrimgeour and Dumbledore were waiting. Harry tried not to allow Scrimgeour’s longwinded speechifying annoy him. The Minister had arranged for a reporter (thankfully not Rita Skeeter) and photographer from the Daily Prophet to memorialize the moment.

The Minister said grandly, for the benefit of the reporter, “We are thrilled to be present at this special day when Harry Potter assumes his rightful place in our world. Harry has successfully completed both his studies and his course of medical treatment. With the end of the guardianship,” Harry noticed that Scrimgeour still couldn’t bring himself to say the word ‘indenture’, “Harry now stands ready to represent a proud and ancient family line. We wish Harry good luck. We at the Ministry take pride in having contributed to making Harry the happy and healthy wizard we see standing here today.”

Harry felt a flare of anger and bit his tongue. Now was not the time to get into a debate regarding the ethics of the Ministry’s having forced him into an indenture in the first place. The wizarding world had a lot to learn about respecting individual rights. But, today, Harry was determined to enjoy his birthday and the luxury of having his freedom.

A short ceremony followed Scrimgeour’s speech. Snape agreed that Dumbledore’s debt to him – which Harry’s indenture was meant to satisfy --- was paid in full. Dumbledore waved his wand, Snape muttered some words, and the spell was lifted.

“Is it gone?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore nodded. Snape said dryly, “Why don’t we test it? Jump up and down three times, Potter.”

Harry jumped up and down three times. He turned appalled eyes on the adults.

Everyone stared at him in varying degrees of shock and dismay, their mouths open.

“How...how...?” spluttered Snape.

“Oh, Merlin,” breathed Scrimgeour in horror. The reporter dropped her quill in shock.

Dumbledore was speechless and just continued staring at Harry in alarm.

Then, Harry grinned broadly and said, “Just kidding! I’m fine.”

It took a second for his words to sink in. Then, Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled, Scrimgeour looked so relieved, Harry thought the older man might faint, and Snape looked furious.

“Potter...” the potions master began, in a threatening tone.

To forestall Snape’s angry words, Dumbledore interrupted. “Congratulations, Harry,” he said.

“Thanks,” said the boy, still grinning, unrepentant. He was too happy.

Snape looked a bit sour. He muttered, “Remember that just because the indenture is over is no excuse to act irresponsibly. You are a role model for witch and wizard children everywhere and I expect you to behave sensibly. Unlike your recent behavior.”

Harry tried to dampen his smile and appear appropriately serious as he promised, “Don’t worry. I will.”

Harry heard a whisper. “What was that?” he asked.

“What was what?” asked Snape.

“I heard some whispering,” said Harry, looking around.

“I didn’t hear anything,” said the potions master. The other adults in the room also shook their heads.

Harry shrugged. “I must have misheard.”

“What are you planning on doing now, Harry?” asked the reporter, bending to pick up her fallen quill.

“I’m going to take the summer to decide,” said the teen. “I’ll be moving into my own place – and, no, I won’t tell you where,” he said with a little laugh. “I have some ideas about what I might do, but I want to take some time to look around and decide.”

“We wish you well, Harry,” said the reporter. “We will be keeping an eye on you.”

Harry rolled his eyes. “That’s what I’m afraid of!” he said. “I wish you guys would give me some space!”

The reporter laughed. “You sell papers, Harry! I can tell you that the news that you are planning on staying in the wizarding world is going to be well-received. Many people were worried that you were thinking of returning to the muggle world.”

“Harry belongs here!” objected Scrimgeour. “He knows that!”

Harry smiled politely but didn’t respond. “I don’t want to seem rude,” said Harry, “but would you mind if I leave now? I have some friends waiting for me.”

“Arthur Weasley’s family, right?” said Scrimgeour knowingly.

The reporter lifted her head, scenting a story. “Ginny Weasley?” she asked. “Isn’t she your girlfriend, Harry?”

Harry blushed. "I am friends with the whole Weasley family," he replied.

"Goodbye, Harry," said Dumbledore, shaking his hand. "Our paths will cross again, I have no doubt. And, if, at any time, you wish to visit me, I would be delighted to see you."

"Thank you, Professor," said Harry. They both knew that Harry would not visit him. But, as Dumbledore had said, they would meet again. They were bound to move in the same circles from time to time.

The headmaster handed Harry a package wrapped in brown paper. "This item was your father's, as we discussed, Harry. Use it well."

Harry reached eagerly for the package. "Thanks!" he breathed. He effortlessly shrunk the package and stuck it in his robe pocket. He couldn't wait to open it later.

Snape's invitation to keep in touch was issued in the potions master's usual gruff manner. "Potter. Remember that your behavior reflects on me, as people know I held your indenture over this last year and a half. I expect to receive regular updates on your activities."

"Yes, sir," said Harry seriously, striving hard not to smile. "Should I report on my behavior next Saturday night?"

Snape was silent for a moment. Then, he nodded brusquely and said, "Be at my home at 8 pm for dinner."

"Yes, sir," said Harry agreeably. Snape looked marginally more cheerful with future dinner plans arranged.

With a last goodbye, Harry made his way to Arthur Weasley's office, where Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, Ron, Hermione, Draco and Ginny should be waiting. He couldn't wait to see them. It had been six weeks since he had last seen his friends, and letters, while great, weren't the same as spending time together in person. Harry wondered whether he could find a private corner to spend some alone time with Ginny.

Harry was in the elevator alone when he heard the whispering again, louder this time. He looked around, but there was nobody in the elevator. He listened more carefully, trying to make out the words. The whisper came again. It was like the sound of a breeze. He couldn't make out any individual words but he knew that it was calling him.

In a trance, Harry found himself pushing the button for the lowest level. When the elevator stopped, Harry stepped out and looked around. The hallway was deserted. The whisper came again, slightly louder and more urgent. Harry followed the sound, which beckoned to him like a siren's song. Through hallways and rotating doors, Harry followed the whispering. Finally, he opened a door onto what appeared to be an amphitheater. At the bottom of the sunken room, on a raised platform, was a stone archway. A black veil draped over the archway fluttered slightly, although there was no breeze.

The whisper grew louder and Harry knew that the sound issued from behind the veil of that archway. Slowly he descended the stone stairs that led to the platform on which the archway stood. As he approached, the whispering grew louder and Harry realized that there was more than one voice calling. The closer he drew, the clearer became the voices until, standing directly in front of the archway, Harry heard the voices of his parents.

"Harry," they called. His name was said so softly it was almost a sigh.

Excitedly, Harry answered, "I'm here!" He stared intently at the archway but the veil obscured anything behind it. The archway started to glow slightly and the veil fluttered more rapidly.

"Are you in there?" he asked. "Should I come through?"

"If you come," whispered his mother, "you will never be able to return."

His father's voice continued, "You had the choice before to come with us or return to your world. You chose to return to defeat Voldemort and we are so proud of you."

"Why are you here now? Do you want me to follow you?"

"We are always here," said Lily. "This is a portal to the other world. You can hear us because you have been closer to death than any other wizard. Because you did not fear death, you have control over it. No other wizard can hear the voices inside so clearly."

"You haven't heard us before because the indenture acted as a filter and wouldn't allow our voices to be heard. Our voices would pull you toward us and the indenture only permits you to obey your master," explained his father.

"Oh." Harry stared again into the veil. "I wish I could see you. I miss you so much."

"We miss you too," said Lily. "We love you so much."

A swell of longing surged up in Harry. His parents' love at least was real. He could believe them. And, oh, how he had wanted to feel that love again. He had been deluding himself into believing that the imitation friendship and love that he had now was enough to satisfy him.

Choking with emotion, Harry seized on his mother's words. "You are the only ones who ever really loved me. I want to be go with you. I want to be loved again." He took a step closer to the veil and, dimly in the background, he thought he heard a scream. He ignored it and listened to his parents.

"Oh, Harry," said Lily sadly. "We are not the only ones who love you. Open your heart to the possibility of love."

James interrupted. "Don't let Petunia poison you, son."

"You heard what she said?" Harry asked.

“Yes. We are always with you. Loving you. Watching over you,” said his father.

“That’s not true!” objected Harry. Finally, he allowed himself to admit a secret hurt that he had been carrying in his heart for years. “You didn’t even recognize me when I was fighting Voldemort – the night he was reborn. You know, when *priori incantatem* made you come out of his wand. You didn’t even know who I was!”

“No, Harry,” objected his father. “We were there and watching you, as we watch you every day of your life. But, the images of us that came out of Voldemort’s wand were not us.”

“Your father’s right,” agreed Lily. “They were not our ...spirits. They were just an impression of us. Like a portrait.”

“You have always felt as if you were on your own, Harry,” continued his father. “But you are not. We are always with you. And, if you look around you, you will see that there are other people there for you. Wanting to support you. Wanting to love you.”

“You are worthy of being loved, Harry,” said his mother. “Believe that and you will find the happiness you seek.”

The glow of the archway started to dim and the veil’s fluttering began to slow.

“Goodbye,” Harry whispered.

In the distance, he thought he heard his parents’ voices calling a farewell to him.

Slowly, Harry turned away from the archway. In surprise, he saw that a group of people were gathered at the top of the stone stairs. There was Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Draco, Dumbledore, Snape, and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley. What were they doing here?

Harry jumped down from the dais and approached the group. Everyone was looking at him with varying degrees of shock and worry.

Snape spoke first, his voice harsh and his breathing irregular, "Your friends wondered what was taking you so long and they came to find you. When we realized that you hadn't arrived at Arthur's office, we started a search. The security system at the Ministry was able to tell us that you were headed in this direction."

Mr. Weasley's mouth was open and he muttered, as if speaking to himself, "I've never heard of the archway acting that way before. You were communing with the dead! You spoke to the dead!"

Hermione's voice was shrill when she said, "We thought you were going to step into the veil! We thought you were going to..." Harry noticed that her cheeks were wet with tears.

Dumbledore looked extremely grave as he explained further, "When we realized that you were headed for the Department of Mysteries, we were worried that you would come to this room."

Draco's voice was shaky as he said, "You're a git, Potter. Didn't I teach you anything? When you make plans for lunch, it's the height of rudeness to be late."

Harry looked at Ginny. She hadn't said a word. She was just staring at him with piercing, haunted eyes. He realized hers had been the scream he had heard earlier. Her nose was red and her cheeks also bore the marks of recent tears.

Staring at the group standing there, Harry realized with a start that they were all worried about him. This is what Snape, Dumbledore, Ginny, and his parents had all been trying to convince him about. This band of people looking at him with worry in their eyes weren't just concerned about him because he was the famous Boy Who Lived. They cared about him – the person behind the fame. They all really cared! Even Dumbledore, that manipulative, ruthless, dangerous man. And, perhaps they weren't the only ones. There were the Weasley twins and other school friends. Maybe, he really

did have a circle of people who cared about him, some of whom could love him.

He could never trust them completely. He had been through too much, seen too much. But, even though he wasn't sure if he could ever entirely trust anyone, he could open himself up to the possibility of love as his mother had told him to do. Maybe it wouldn't last forever but that didn't make it any less real.

Stepping forward, he reached out and pulled Ginny into his arms. She gave a little gasp and burst into tears. He hugged her and shushed her. "It's all right," he murmured. "I'm sorry for worrying you."

Over Ginny's head, Ron nodded and said, his voice gruff, "Please don't frighten us like that again, mate. We thought that maybe you had chosen to leave the wizarding world after all. Not to go to the muggle world, but to join your parents."

Mrs. Weasley looked like she wanted to cry too. "Your parents wouldn't want you to join them, Harry. They'd want you to be happy here, in this world."

Harry nodded his head. "I know. They do want me to be happy. I'm not joining my parents," he promised.

Ginny stepped back and scanned his face intently, trying to judge his sincerity.

Harry smiled. A quiet sense of peace settled over him and it shone in his eyes. Yes, this world was flawed. Yes, he would have demons to battle, perhaps for the rest of his life. But, he didn't have to battle them alone. Finally, he could let his heart believe that he mattered. That he could be loved.

"I am exactly where I belong."

The End